

Gift and Anti-gift: The Dynamics of Relationships in MMORPGs

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This thesis is submitted to Lancaster University for the degree of
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Dedicated to my beloved family, with a special tribute to my father in heaven, whose love, guidance, and strength continue to inspire me each day.

Declaration

This thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated. Many of the ideas in this thesis were the product of discussion with my supervisors Dr. Xin Zhao and Dr. Eman Gadalla.

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“No Game, No Life.”

Abstract

This dissertation explores the evolving dynamics of virtual gifting practices, with a specific focus on the interaction between human actors and non-human digital beings, such as computer-generated entities (CGEs), in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Drawing primarily on theories of gift exchange and employing Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a theoretical lens, the study examines how these interactions shape the socio-cultural and relational dimensions of virtual environments. A key contribution of this research is the conceptualization of anti-gift, a deliberate and adversarial form of exchange characterized by actions such as resource exploitation, marauding, and conflict-driven interactions. While inherently malicious, anti-gift paradoxically fosters social cohesion by strengthening bonds within virtual communities through shared experiences of loss, retaliation, and collective counteractions. Additionally, the study highlights the unique dynamics of human-digital interaction, revealing how digital beings, as active participants, influence reciprocity and gifting behaviors in MMORPGs. By contextualizing anti-gift within broader frameworks of malicious reciprocity and digital gift exchange, this research provides novel insights into the cultural and social mechanisms of virtual communities. These findings advance theoretical discourse on human-non-human interaction and have practical implications for understanding the social dynamics of online networks and virtual economies.

Keywords: virtual gift, anti-gift, non-human interactions, computer-generated entities,

malicious reciprocity, MMORPGs, gift exchange theory, Actor-Network Theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research background

The practice of gifting has long been a subject of interest in anthropology, sociology, and consumer behavior studies. Classical theories, such as Mauss's (1925) concept of reciprocity, provide foundational insights into the social and cultural functions of gifting. Mauss argued that gifts are never truly free; they are imbued with obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate. This framework highlights the role of gifting in fostering social cohesion and establishing moral obligations within communities. In traditional societies, gifting often served to reinforce relationships, create alliances, and establish social hierarchies. The "spirit of the gift", as described by Mauss, implies that the act of giving extends beyond material exchange, embedding symbolic and emotional significance into social transactions. Sahlins (1972) expanded upon this by classifying reciprocity into generalized, balanced, and negative forms, reflecting the varying degrees of social closeness and expectation of return. These theories provide an essential lens to explore gifting in modern and digital contexts, where the nature of relationships and exchanges has become more complex.

In the realm of consumer behavior, Sherry's (1983) processual model of gifting further enriches the understanding of gifting by emphasizing its multidimensional nature, which includes social, personal, and economic dimensions. Traditional gifting practices are often imbued with meanings that extend beyond the gift itself, reflecting the giver's intentions, the recipient's status, and the broader social context. However, as digital environments such as online games have emerged, these traditional notions of gifting have been recontextualized. Virtual gifting, which refers to the exchange of intangible items like in-game objects or digital currencies, introduces a unique set of dynamics that challenge established theories. The intangible nature of virtual gifts has prompted debate about whether they can carry the same social and symbolic weight as physical gifts, making them a rich subject for further study. Existing studies suggest that such immaterial exchanges can support intimacy, recognition and social connection,

although the meanings attached to them are strongly shaped by platform architectures and community norms and may not fully mirror those of offline gifts (Alkhawwari, 2024; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024).

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) provide an ideal context for exploring the complexities of virtual gifting. MMORPGs have revolutionized the digital entertainment landscape, transforming traditional video games into immersive and interactive social environments. These games allow thousands of players to coexist in persistent virtual worlds that continue to evolve regardless of individual players' participation (Choi & Williams, 2025). Unlike traditional single-player games, MMORPGs are characterized by synchronous interactions, where players engage with one another and the environment in real time. Recent overviews of social gaming and online game communities emphasize that MMORPGs, in particular, sustain dense networks of cooperation, reciprocity and social support, which makes them a distinctive setting for studying gifting practices (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Wu & Chang, 2025). These features create a sense of immersion and foster the development of complex social ecosystems within the game world.

In these virtual spaces, players navigate through avatars that serve as their primary means of interaction. Avatars, which refers to customizable digital representations of players, act as extensions of their identity, enabling them to build relationships, participate in community activities, and contribute to the evolving culture of the game. Empirical studies on social play and virtual worlds show that players often develop strong attachments to their avatars and to in-game social ties, treating them as meaningful extensions of self and social life (Shoshani et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2024). This avatar-mediated interaction creates a sense of agency and belonging, allowing players to engage in social behaviors that mirror those in the physical world. MMORPGs thus operate as dynamic social laboratories where players construct hierarchies, establish economic systems, and negotiate cultural norms. These virtual

worlds are not just games; they are complex ecosystems that blend entertainment with meaningful social interactions. Systematic reviews of interaction with avatars and virtual agents in immersive environments similarly link digital embodiment and social presence to trust, attachment and relationship-building (Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Jacucci et al., 2024), which underpins the social significance of gifting between players and other in-game entities.

Within this vibrant environment, virtual gifting has emerged as a core social practice. Virtual gifts, often in the form of in-game items, currencies, or privileges, serve purposes that extend beyond their functional utility. These gifts are instrumental in building relationships, demonstrating status, and expressing gratitude. Large-scale behavioural and survey studies in multiplayer games suggest that giving and sharing virtual resources can promote cooperation, reciprocity and social capital, reinforcing both individual ties and group cohesion (Bisberg et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022). Despite their lack of physicality, virtual gifts hold significant symbolic and emotional value, echoing the importance of physical gifts in traditional societies. In the early days of MMORPGs, gifting was largely driven by altruism and mutual aid. Players often exchanged items to help each other navigate challenging game mechanics or to foster a sense of camaraderie. Recent work during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, highlights how MMORPG-based social interactions such as sharing of items and resources contributed to players' sense of social well-being (Grinyer et al., 2022). Over time, these acts of generosity became institutionalized, forming the basis of elaborate social rituals within gaming communities.

As virtual gifting evolved, it began to mirror and diverge from traditional gifting practices in intriguing ways. Like physical gifts, virtual gifts are often exchanged within a framework of reciprocity, where the act of giving creates an expectation of return. However, the digital context introduces unique dynamics. The anonymity of online interactions allows players to engage in gifting without the constraints of real-world social obligations. At the same time, the transient nature of digital items challenges

traditional notions of permanence and ownership, making the act of gifting more fluid and context-dependent. These factors suggest a hybrid form of exchange that blends elements of altruism, transactional, and cultural expression, and they intersect with broader patterns of reciprocity and social capital formation observed in contemporary online gaming communities (Kim, 2025; Sachan et al., 2025), raising questions about how traditional theories of gifting apply in such a context.

The rise of MMORPGs is closely tied to the broader evolution of digital technologies and online social networks. Early online games, such as Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), laid the groundwork for today's complex virtual worlds by introducing basic mechanisms for player interaction and cooperation. As internet infrastructure improved, these text-based environments evolved into visually immersive worlds capable of supporting large-scale player interactions. In China, the development of MMORPGs has been particularly notable, paralleling the rapid expansion of internet access and digital literacy. Games like "*World of Warcraft*" and "*Final Fantasy XIV*" have not only captured the imagination of millions of players but have also become vibrant sites of social and cultural activity. These games provide a unique context for examining how virtual gifting practices reflect and shape broader societal trends. While online gifting also takes prominent forms in live streaming and social media, where virtual gifts are closely linked to monetized, audience–performer relationships (Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024), this research focuses specifically on gifting practices within MMORPGs, where gifts circulate inside persistent, collaborative game communities.

1.2. Significance of the research

Understanding how traditional social practices adapt to digital environments is a pressing academic question in the context of the growing significance of virtual worlds (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Choi & Williams, 2025). Gifting, a core mechanism of social interaction, is central to the maintenance of relationships, the establishment of social bonds, and the expression of identity. In traditional societies, extensive theoretical

frameworks such as Mauss's concept of reciprocity (1925/1990) and Sahlins' typology of exchange (1972) have illuminated the cultural and relational significance of gifting. However, as social interaction increasingly migrates to virtual spaces, these frameworks face new challenges. This research is important because it explores how digital environments reshape foundational social practices, with a particular focus on virtual gifting in online games, an area that has only recently begun to receive systematic attention (Alkhawwari, 2024; Zhang, 2022). By examining how classical gift and reciprocity theories can be mobilized, extended, and tested in the context of virtual worlds, the study addresses an academic gap in the adaptation of these frameworks to contemporary, digitally mediated forms of exchange.

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) provide an exceptional environment to investigate this phenomenon. These virtual worlds are not merely games; they are complex ecosystems where players form communities, establish norms, and engage in meaningful interactions. Gifting within MMORPGs is particularly significant as it mirrors and reinterprets offline social practices within a new digital framework. Studying these practices offers insights into how longstanding concepts of reciprocity and social bonds are reconstructed in virtual spaces. Contemporary research on social gaming and online multiplayer environments shows that MMORPGs sustain dense networks of cooperation, reciprocity, and social support (Bisberg et al., 2022; Gonçalves et al., 2023), which makes them a distinctive and theoretically productive setting for studying gifting as a social practice. This knowledge is essential for understanding the evolution of human interaction in an increasingly digital world.

The study is significant because it delves into the cultural and relational aspects of virtual gifting, rather than focusing solely on its transactional or economic dimensions. Virtual gifts, while lacking physical form, carry significant symbolic value that influences social cohesion and identity formation within digital communities. This raises important questions about how reciprocity, obligation, and value are maintained

in contexts where physical exchange is absent. Recent work on virtual gifts and digital possessions suggests that immaterial gifts can still sustain recognition, intimacy, and belonging, but that their meanings are strongly shaped by platform architectures, social norms, and community expectations (Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Alkhawwari, 2024). Furthermore, this research highlights the underexplored relationship between human and non-human entities in the digital context. Elements such as game mechanics, algorithms, and virtual items actively shape the dynamics of gifting, challenging traditional notions of agency and interaction. Studies on players' interactions with non-human agents and AI-controlled companions in games demonstrate that such entities participate in trust-building, reputation, and cooperative behaviour (Aydin et al., 2023; Azad & Martens, 2021), reinforcing the need to treat both human and technological actors as co-constitutive of social practices. By addressing these complexities, the study advances theoretical discussions on how human and technological actors co-construct social practices.

The relevance of this research lies in its specific focus on a relatively underexplored aspect of virtual environments: the role of gifting as a social practice. While earlier studies have expanded the understanding of online relationships and digital exchanges (e.g., Cheal, 1988; Taylor, 2006), there is still limited academic focus on how gifting operates within the unique dynamics of MMORPGs. Much of the contemporary scholarship on virtual gifting has concentrated on livestreaming, social media, and commerce-oriented platforms, where gifts are closely tied to monetization, visibility, and parasocial relations (Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Zhang & Liu, 2024). In contrast, gifting in MMORPGs is embedded in persistent, collaborative game communities and long-term peer relationships, but this setting has received comparatively less systematic attention. This study deepens the discourse by examining gifting as a cultural practice, shedding light on how it reinforces relationships, fosters community, and constructs value within these digital ecosystems.

Finally, this research is crucial for its cross-cultural perspective. By situating the

study within the context of Chinese MMORPGs, it examines how cultural values influence digital practices. China's online gaming landscape is one of the most dynamic and culturally distinctive in the world, making it an ideal setting for exploring how localized cultural norms intersect with global digital trends. Recent work on multiplayer online games and gaming communities underscores the importance of regional histories, regulatory frameworks, and local play cultures in shaping how virtual worlds are used as social and cultural infrastructures (Wu & Chang, 2025; Sachan et al., 2025). This perspective not only enriches the academic discourse on virtual environments but also highlights the broader cultural implications of digitalization.

1.3. Research objectives and research questions

This study aims to deepen the academic understanding of virtual gifting practices within the context of MMORPGs by investigating their historical evolution, characteristics, and unique forms. Virtual gifting serves as a multifaceted practice at the intersection of social and cultural interaction, challenging traditional concepts of reciprocity, value, and obligation. The overarching goal of this research is to examine how gifting practices develop, operate, and transform within MMORPGs as dynamic virtual ecosystems, influencing and being influenced by the unique features of virtual environments. While other forms of online gifting, such as livestreaming or social media-based practices, are referenced where appropriate for contrast, the empirical focus of this thesis remains on MMORPGs as a specific type of virtual world.

To achieve these aims, the research is guided by three core objectives:

- 1. To explore the historical and contextual evolution of virtual gifting practices in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), situating them within the broader development of online gifting and digital cultures.**
- 2. To examine the characteristics of virtual gifting in MMORPGs, focusing on the components involved in gifting practices and the relationships between them.**
- 3. To analyze the unique forms of online gifting that emerge in MMORPGs, including both cooperative and more contentious practices, and to examine their**

social and cultural influence on relationships and community dynamics.

These objectives collectively seek to uncover the dynamics of virtual gifting as an evolving and transformative practice. The first objective focuses on understanding the temporal and cultural shifts in gifting behaviors in and around MMORPGs, emphasizing the environmental and societal drivers behind these changes. The second objective centers on the structural aspects of gifting practices, analyzing their components, such as the gifts themselves, the actors involved, and the interactions between these elements. The third objective expands on this understanding by investigating distinctive and sometimes unconventional forms of gifting in MMORPGs, assessing their cultural significance and their effects on relationships and social cohesion within these game communities.

The research addresses the following questions to achieve these objectives:

- 1. How have online gifting practices in MMORPGs evolved, and what factors within these games and their surrounding cultures have shaped their development?**
- 2. What are the characteristics of the components of virtual gifting in MMORPGs, and how do these components shape the uniqueness of virtual gifts in this context?**
- 3. What are the unique forms of online gifting that arise in MMORPGs, and how do they influence social and cultural dynamics within game communities and related social networks?**

This research contributes significantly to the academic discourse on virtual gifting through its theoretical, empirical, and methodological dimensions. Theoretically, it advances the understanding of gifting and reciprocity by situating these traditional practices within the unique context of virtual worlds. By exploring the intangible nature of digital items, the gamified interactions in MMORPGs, and the reconfiguration of social obligations in mediated environments, the study extends existing theories of gifting and reciprocity and engages with social exchange perspectives as a complementary background frame. It highlights how virtual ecosystems challenge and

reshape established notions of value, reciprocity, and obligation, offering a nuanced framework for understanding gifting behaviors in digital contexts.

Empirically, the research provides a detailed examination of virtual gifting practices, emphasizing their role in fostering relationships, shaping community norms, and influencing social cohesion. The study's focus on Chinese MMORPGs introduces a culturally specific perspective, revealing how localized cultural norms intersect with global gaming dynamics. The findings illuminate the diversity and complexity of virtual gifting practices, showcasing their integrative roles in community-building as well as their potential to create tensions and redefine relationships. These insights contribute to the broader understanding of how digital environments mediate social interactions and cultural expressions.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the effectiveness of a triangulated qualitative approach, integrating netnography, in-depth interviews, and historical analysis. This comprehensive methodology captures the multifaceted nature of virtual gifting and provides a robust framework for investigating digital social behaviors. By combining insights from sociology, anthropology, and media studies, the research offers an interdisciplinary perspective that enhances its depth and adaptability. This methodological innovation not only strengthens the study's credibility but also serves as a replicable model for future investigations into complex digital phenomena.

Beyond its academic contributions, this research offers practical implications for game developers, community managers, and digital platform designers. By uncovering the dynamics of virtual gifting, the study provides actionable insights for fostering positive social interactions and ethical design in virtual ecosystems. These findings can inform the creation of mechanisms that promote inclusivity, reciprocity, and community cohesion while mitigating potential conflicts or exploitative practices. Through its theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions, this research advances both scholarly understanding and practical engagement with the evolving dynamics of virtual social practices.

1.4. Thesis outline

The thesis is organized into nine chapters, each serving a distinct purpose in addressing the research objectives and answering the research questions. This structure ensures a logical progression from establishing the context and theoretical foundation to presenting empirical findings and their broader implications.

Chapter One: Introduction provides a comprehensive overview of the research, situating it within the broader academic discourse on virtual gifting practices. This chapter introduces the significance of studying these practices in MMORPGs, highlighting their unique position at the intersection of social interaction and digital innovation. It sets forth the research objectives and questions, outlining the theoretical and empirical gaps the study seeks to address. By articulating the rationale for focusing on MMORPGs, this chapter establishes the foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Chapter Two: Context: Virtual World of Online Gaming explores the setting of the research, delving into the defining characteristics of MMORPGs. This chapter examines the key components of virtual worlds, including avatars, non-player characters (NPCs), in-game items, and economic systems, to illustrate the socio-digital environment where virtual gifting occurs. Additionally, it considers the cultural and structural dimensions of MMORPGs, demonstrating their role in shaping complex social interactions and community-building. Where relevant, it also briefly contrasts MMORPGs with other contemporary forms of online gifting, such as livestreaming and social media, in order to clarify the specific virtual environment in which this thesis is situated.

Chapter Three: Literature Review surveys existing research on gifting practices and reciprocity theories, particularly as they relate to virtual environments. This chapter critically examines traditional frameworks, such as those derived from anthropological studies of gifting, while identifying theoretical gaps in their application to MMORPG contexts. The review underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how gifting practices are adapted and transformed within virtual worlds, providing a robust

theoretical foundation for the study. It also refines the thesis's theoretical positioning by foregrounding gift and reciprocity frameworks and outlining how these are extended and complemented in the analysis.

Chapter Four: Methodology outlines the interpretive research approach employed in this study, emphasizing its alignment with the research questions and theoretical framework. This chapter describes the triangulated qualitative methods used, including historical documentary analysis, netnography, and in-depth interviews, which together enable a comprehensive exploration of virtual gifting practices. It also addresses ethical considerations and methodological limitations, ensuring transparency and rigor in the research process. The chapter concludes by summarizing how the three empirical phases of the study are designed to address the three research objectives and their corresponding research questions.

Chapter Five: Phase I Findings: Historical Patterns of Online Gift presents findings from the historical analysis of virtual gifting practices. This chapter traces the evolution of gifting behaviors, from their origins in early online gaming platforms to their current manifestations in MMORPGs. It identifies key patterns and milestones, offering insights into how virtual gifting practices have developed in response to technological and social changes. The findings emphasize the foundational practices and cultural significance of virtual gifting, providing a context for understanding contemporary dynamics. In doing so, Chapter Five primarily addresses the first research objective and Research Question 1, which concern the historical and contextual evolution of online gifting in and around MMORPGs.

Chapter Six: Phase II Findings: Gift and Community in Virtual Worlds focuses on the current state of virtual gifting practices in MMORPGs, examining their role in shaping social relationships and community norms. This chapter investigates the diversity of gifting behaviors, including those that strengthen social bonds and those that challenge community cohesion. It provides a nuanced understanding of how gifting practices influence and reflect the cultural and social dynamics of MMORPG

communities. The analysis in this chapter is closely linked to the second research objective and Research Question 2, which focus on the components of virtual gifting and their roles in structuring relationships and community life.

Chapter Seven: Phase III Findings: Virtual Ecosystems and Gifting Practices examines how the characteristics of virtual worlds shape the forms and meanings of gifting. This chapter explores the interplay between players and the structural features of these environments, revealing how virtual gifting contributes to the social fabric of MMORPGs. The findings highlight the intricate ways in which gifting practices foster relationships, reciprocity, and collective identity, demonstrating their significance within virtual ecosystems. Chapter Seven also introduces distinctive and sometimes contentious forms of gifting, which relate directly to the third research objective and Research Question 3 on the unique forms and broader social and cultural consequences of online gifting in MMORPGs.

Chapter Eight: Analysis and Discussion synthesizes the findings through the lens of relevant theoretical frameworks, including Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the interactions within virtual gifting networks, emphasizing the hybrid nature of social relationships in MMORPGs. It discusses the broader implications of these interactions for theories of gifting, reciprocity, and community, highlighting the transformative potential of virtual environments. In particular, Chapter Eight brings together the three empirical phases to revisit and answer the three research questions, showing how the findings collectively extend existing understandings of gifting and reciprocity in digital contexts.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion, Contribution, and Implication concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings and aligning them with the research objectives and questions. This chapter articulates the study's theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions, emphasizing its relevance to the fields of digital sociology and gaming studies. It also discusses the practical implications for game design and online community management, providing recommendations for fostering

positive social interactions in virtual environments. Finally, it outlines directions for future research, encouraging further exploration of virtual gifting practices and their evolving dynamics in digital ecosystems. The chapter closes by reflecting on the wider significance of MMORPG-based gifting for understanding contemporary forms of sociality, value, and exchange in an increasingly digitalized world.

1.5. Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive foundation for the study by situating virtual gifting practices within the broader academic discourse and highlighting their significance in the context of MMORPGs. By drawing from classical theories of reciprocity and gifting, it has contextualized how these concepts are transformed and reinterpreted within digital environments. The chapter also outlined the cultural and social implications of virtual gifting, emphasizing its role in community-building, social cohesion, and the construction of value in virtual worlds. Building on this foundation, the chapter has clarified the thesis's focus on gifting practices within MMORPGs, with particular attention to Chinese game contexts as a distinctive site where global and local dynamics intersect. The research objectives and questions articulated in this chapter serve as the guiding framework for the study, addressing critical gaps in the literature on virtual gifting. These include exploring the historical and contextual evolution of gifting practices, analyzing their impact on social networks and community norms, and assessing how digital environments reshape traditional gifting paradigms.

In sum, this chapter establishes the groundwork for an in-depth exploration of virtual gifting in MMORPGs, setting the stage for subsequent chapters to investigate the complexities and nuances of this evolving social practice. Chapter Two introduces the virtual world of online gaming as the contextual backdrop; Chapter Three develops the theoretical framework around gifting, reciprocity, and virtual exchange; and Chapter Four details the interpretive, multi-phased methodology through which the three research objectives and their corresponding questions are addressed. Through this

framework, the study seeks to advance academic discussions on digital social interactions and contribute meaningful insights into the dynamics of virtual communities.

2. CONTEXT: VIRTUAL WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

2.1. Introduction

Online game is a video game that is either partially or primarily played through the Internet or any other computer network available (Adams 2014). This kind of game service is usually provided by the server set up by the game producer, while consumers connect to the server through the client on the computer or other device for game experiencing. Compared with the traditional single-player video game, the characteristics of online games are the combination of entertainment and interaction. With the development of the Internet, design of online games has completed an evolution from simple text-based environments (such as the early text-based MUD, multi-user dungeon) to the incorporation of complex graphics and virtual worlds (Hachman 2017), known today as Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG). MMOG enables thousands of players present simultaneously in the same persistent virtual environment at any given moment. Each player has a character, or avatar, which refers to a graphic representation of the consumer's virtual self through which s/he interacts with other consumers/avatars (Galanxhi and Nah 2007). The communication and interaction between avatars make the environment within the game more social, and at the same time forms a unique consumer culture that supports enduring forms of social interaction, community-building, and reciprocity (Gonçalves, Sousa, & Nisi, 2023; Wu & Chang, 2025; Choi & Williams, 2025; Sachan, Chhabra, & Abraham, 2025).

In terms of their content and environment, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) can be classified into various categories, including Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs), Massively Multiplayer Online First-person Shooters (MMOFPS), Massively Multiplayer Online Real-time Strategies (MMORTS), as well as other genres like sports, racing, and music/rhythm games (Nagygyörgy et al.,

2012). Among these categories, MMORPGs are chosen as the research context due to their creation of a virtual world based on game settings, which closely resembles real-life social environments and exhibits unique characteristics of online communities (Castranova, 2008). Concurrently, the growth of MMORPGs in China is intricately tied to the expansion and popularization of the Chinese Internet. This development process has yielded abundant resources concerning the social environment within gaming worlds and related online communities, which are valuable for our research and align with recent evidence that online games function as dense social spaces associated with well-being, participation, and collective engagement (Kim, 2025; Pang et al., 2025; Scheifer & Samuel, 2025).

In this chapter, we will focus on the characteristics of MMORPGs as the research background. MMORPGs are considered to offer an online virtual world, which differs slightly from previous literature definitions. This chapter provides an elucidation of the context of MMORPGs from both a micro-level system composition and a macro-level playability perspective. The former encompasses the content and setting of online role-playing games, including their characteristics and mechanisms. Specific attention is given to the components of the virtual world, such as characters and items. The latter primarily focuses on the game progression and mechanics designed within the game system, thereby establishing the structural and social conditions within which the gifting practices analyzed in later chapters take shape.

2.2. Definition of virtual world

The concept of a virtual world is often defined as “a place described by words or projected through pictures, creating a space in the imagination that is sufficiently real for one to feel immersed in it” (Damer et al., 2008). Previous literature has presented various perspectives on the virtual world. Bartle (2004) defines it as “an environment that its inhabitants consider self-contained, which does not necessarily have to be an entire planet.” Koster (2004) argues that a virtual world is “a spatially-based representation of a persistent virtual environment, experienced simultaneously by

multiple participants who are represented within the space by avatars.” Castranova (2008) defines the virtual world as “a crafted place within computers designed to accommodate a large number of people.” The most widely recognized definition by Bell (2008) characterizes a virtual world as “a synchronous, persistent network of people represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers.” Here, synchronous refers to shared activities requiring real-time communication, enabling mass group activities and coordinated social interactions. Persistence alters the way individuals interact with other participants and the environment, giving them a sense that the space continues to exist with or without their participation. Participants' interactions form a network where the actions of one participant ripple through the world, affecting every other part of the system. Their representation as avatars grants agency and is controlled by human agents in real-time. Without networked computers, the virtual world would never achieve the levels of complexity and persistence that expand beyond the limits of imagination. More recent scholarship on social virtual reality and multi-user immersive platforms continues to emphasize synchronous, persistent, avatar-based environments as key sites of social interaction, learning, and identity work (Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Jacucci et al., 2024; Schmidbauer et al., 2025; Hu et al., 2025), which reinforces the continued relevance of these classic definitions. The virtual world offers a unique context for examining the relationships between individuals and digital possessions.

In this study, we conceptualize a virtual world as an internet-based social environment established by gaming systems, wherein consumers engage in activities aligned with specific themes. Unlike game spaces, which are characterized by their objective-driven nature, incorporating rules, levels, and a definitive endpoint where game objectives are met, virtual worlds, on the other hand, do not revolve around the rules and goals of a game. Instead, they primarily emphasize social interaction and the creation of user-generated content (Spence, 2008). This distinction has become increasingly salient as virtual worlds and metaverse-like systems are deployed across

entertainment, education, and organizational contexts, where persistent, shared environments provide a backdrop for sustained social practices (Achterbosch, McLeod, & Parsons, 2024; Hanneke et al., 2025).

In the context of MMORPGs, while the primary purpose of the gaming world is to facilitate the achievement of game objectives (Axelsson & Regan, 2006), it also encompasses non-game activities, including socialization and commerce. Social interaction has emerged as a significant objective for players within the MMORPG context, with research indicating that online games are frequently utilized for social purposes to a considerable extent (Axelsson & Regan, 2006). Through their avatars, consumers have collectively constructed the gaming world as a persistent online social space, providing a virtual environment wherein social interaction unfolds (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Additionally, Schroeder (2008) highlights the increasing degree of socialization occurring within persistent online game spaces. Sivan (2008) underscores the intricate nature of modern gaming worlds, laying the groundwork for the development of the social aspect of virtual worlds (Alexander, 2003; Bartle, 2004; Morningstar, Farmer, & Benedikt, 1991; Sivan, 2008; Taylor, 2009). Sivan (2008) accentuates the social nature of virtual worlds and the roles that content and commerce play in reinforcing the integrity and cohesiveness of the virtual realm.

Gaming worlds possess the characteristic features of virtual worlds, embodying synchronous and persistent networks of individuals represented through avatars, facilitated by interconnected computers (Bell, 2008). These virtual environments created by contemporary MMORPGs can be seen as extensions of real society, serving socialization functions. In our research, we investigate the significance of consumer-object interactions in the process of socialization within the virtual context.

2.3. Components of MMORPG

Online role-playing games, as a prominent category within the realm of online games, emerged alongside the rapid expansion of internet availability and had long been synonymous with online gaming. The development of MMORPGs can be attributed, to

some extent, to the dominant position held by traditional role-playing games (RPGs) in the Chinese market. Early online role-playing games evolved from their offline counterparts, wherein players assumed character roles and experienced their respective life stories. However, unlike offline RPGs, which are typically solitary endeavors, MMORPGs are played concurrently by players who can engage in real-time communication and interaction with others. While traditional RPGs offer complete narratives with well-defined starting and ending points, MMORPGs, by their very nature, possess an element of endlessness (Chan & Vorderer, 2006). Due to their inherent structural characteristics, these games do not typically feature predetermined endpoints. Although MMORPGs do have overarching storylines that players can explore, the conclusion of these main plots does not signify the end of the game, as players can continue partaking in various activities. Thus, it is often asserted that RPGs prioritize the narrative itself, whereas MMORPGs place greater emphasis on the characters within the narrative. This open-endedness and emphasis on ongoing character development are closely tied to the formation of long-term social ties, collaborative practices, and emergent communities within game worlds (Bisberg et al., 2022; Gonçalves et al., 2023; Kim, 2025).

One of the most significant attributes of MMORPGs is their “authenticity.” These gaming systems establish a persistent virtual world that continues to exist and evolve over time, even in the absence of active participants. This synchronous real-time environment enhances players' sense of presence and existence. The realism of this world is manifested through its naturalness and sociality. In terms of naturalness, the virtual world strives to provide a sense of environment by replicating the spatial awareness and distances found in real life. This achievement is made possible by the incorporation of computer science and technology within the game system. For instance, a distinguishing feature of MMORPGs is their physicality, wherein the world adheres to a consistent set of physical rules, thereby imparting a sense of space to participants. In terms of sociability, traditional MMORPGs have evolved beyond being mere games

and have transformed into self-contained and vibrant societies with diversity (Young, 2009). Social interaction, cooperation, and competition between characters form an integral part of an individual's gameplay experience (Chan & Vorderer, 2006), offering opportunities to forge friendships and transcend physical distances and other limitations through specialized communication channels (Király et al., 2014). Consequently, the virtual world can instill a sense of living a second life for players, surpassing the notion of merely engaging in a video game.

Virtual worlds not only serve as spatial and environmental settings, but they also play a pivotal role in fostering social interactions. The avatars, which represent the players, are integral to the avatar-mediated nature of online games, enabling users to engage with both the game world and other players. However, avatars alone do not solely provide entertainment within the virtual world. To further enrich the immersive experience and establish a cohesive virtual environment centered around a specific theme, online games feature a multitude of non-player characters (NPCs) akin to those found in single-player games. NPCs are game-controlled entities that exist within the game, distinct from the players themselves. These NPCs exhibit a wide range of characteristics, from ordinary and fantastical to non-human entities (Warpefelt, 2016). Some NPCs hold key roles within the game's narrative arc, while others simply inhabit the virtual world. Regardless of their specific roles, both avatars and NPCs contribute to the realism and authenticity of the virtual world. At the same time, in-game items and other forms of digital possessions provide material anchors for these interactions, supporting status display, cooperation and exchange within MMORPG communities (Hamari & Keronen, 2017; Alkhawwari, 2024).

In addition to the characters found within online games, game props also hold significant importance. These in-game items can be collected and utilized by avatars or NPCs. From equipment such as weapons and armor, to consumables like potions and tonics, and even daily necessities including food and clothing, the diverse array of items greatly enhances the overall gameplay experience and enjoyment of online games.

Similar to the development of societies in the real world, the existence of game items facilitates social interactions between avatars and NPCs, completing the final piece of the puzzle in creating a comprehensive virtual world. The subsequent paragraphs will delve into further details regarding the intricacies of characters (avatars and NPCs) and items within MMORPGs, laying the groundwork for later chapters that analyze how gifting and other forms of exchange emerge from these socio-technical components.

2.3.1. Avatar

An avatar serves as the virtual representation of players within the online gaming world. Similar to traditional role-playing games, players assume the roles of characters within a fictional backdrop by controlling an avatar, which becomes their virtual alter ego. These avatars often embark on special missions or undertake specific adventures as part of an extensive journey. The exploration of the virtual world is made possible through the players' control of their avatars in the real world. This process of playing online games is intricately intertwined with the lives of avatars. By completing various tasks and missions in the game, avatars experience growth and obtain valuable items, leading to differentiation in status among them. In this sense, avatars function not only as control interfaces but also as extensions of players' identities and social selves, enabling experimentation with appearance, roles and relationships in ways that can be meaningful for well-being and self-expression (Shoshani et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2024).

Upon entering an online game, players typically begin by creating their avatars. After registering their game products, players can log in to their accounts and commence the creation process. It is possible for players to establish multiple avatars, limited by the capacity of their account; however, usually only one avatar per account can be online simultaneously. The creation process often commences with selecting a name, referred to as an ID. As it is prohibited for IDs to be repeated within a specific range, such as the game server, the ID becomes closely associated with the identification of an avatar. After selecting a name, players are also required to make choices regarding the appearance and attributes of their avatars, thereby customizing them to their individual

preferences. Research on avatar customization and embodiment shows that these early design choices already shape later attachment to the avatar and players' sense of presence and agency in the virtual world (Ratan & Sah, 2015; Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022).



Figure 1 Interface of Appearance Customazation in *AION*

Source: Image from the post "AION character creation" on r/gaming (Reddit).

The concept of appearance customization refers to the accommodation of players' preferences for their avatars (Teng & Lo, 2010). In the realm of online games, avatars typically represent humans or other human-like races as defined by the game's background, such as elves or merfolk. Initially, players are tasked with selecting the race and gender of their avatars. Furthermore, they are provided with the opportunity to personalize their avatars by determining their facial features and body characteristics. The degree of customization available varies across different games. Early online games only allowed for a limited number of appearance adjustments, such as selecting from a predefined set of eyes, noses, mouths, hair colors, and body shapes (Teng & Lo,

2010). In contrast, contemporary online games offer a greater level of customization, allowing for the modification of facial features and body structures, as depicted in Figure 1. The diverse range of aspects available for avatar customization highlights the significance of this feature. The extent to which players are permitted to personalize their avatars contributes to their sense of deep connection with their virtual counterparts (Ratan & Sah, 2015).

Attribute customization plays a pivotal role in determining the abilities of avatars. These attributes, often referred to as stats, serve as the fundamental building blocks for an avatar's prowess and are typically represented as quantifiable numerical indicators. In the online game *World of Warcraft*, for example, there are four primary attributes: strength, agility, stamina, and intellect. These attributes directly impact the avatar's attack power (both physical and magical), as well as their health and mana reserves (Ratan & Sah, 2015).

The allocation of avatar stats is generally tied to the cultivation intentions of players. In some early online games, players were given the flexibility to freely distribute assignable stat points to their newly created avatars. However, in subsequent iterations, players were primarily required to choose a class during the avatar creation process. A class can be understood as the principal adventuring style or occupation of avatars in the virtual realm, such as warrior, mage, or priest. The chosen class determines the abilities and skills that avatars will acquire throughout their adventures, thus influencing the available play styles. Additionally, the class determines the avatar's suitability for various combat roles. By selecting a class, players effectively chart the trajectory and development path for their avatars in the virtual world (Ratan & Sah, 2015).

Within the current mature environment of MMORPGs, three primary roles have emerged: tank, healer, and damage dealer (as shown in Figure 2). The tank, as their name implies, fulfills the role of absorbing damage and diverting enemy attacks away from other group members. Their primary objective is to maintain aggro and ensure the

safety of their allies (Yee et al., 2011). Healers, on the other hand, are responsible for the crucial task of healing and safeguarding their party members. While success in group endeavors relies on the collective effort of all members, healers bear the direct responsibility of preserving the lives of their comrades. Lastly, damage dealers, often referred to as DPS, are tasked with inflicting damage upon the group's targets. Their primary focus lies in maximizing the party's offensive capabilities (Yee et al., 2011). Each primary role can be fulfilled by various classes, each with distinct character attributes, fighting styles, and skill effects. Some classes even possess the ability to perform multiple roles simultaneously, providing players with a wider range of selection options (Griffiths, 2010)). These class-based roles also come with shared expectations about responsibility, contribution and support within groups, which later shape how help, resources and gifts are offered or withheld between players in both cooperative and more contentious encounters.



Figure 2 Triangle Job System in RPG

Source: Image from player distribution discussion on r/albiononline (Reddit).

2.3.2. Non-Player Character (NPC)

Non-Player Characters (NPCs) refer to characters within the virtual world of a game that are controlled by the game system rather than the players themselves. This term can be traced back to the origins of computer RPGs (CRPGs) and tabletop RPGs (TRPGs), where players or participants would verbally describe their characters' actions. In TRPGs, most participants assume the roles of their in-game characters and determine their characters' actions based on their character settings. These actions are then evaluated against a formal system of rules and guidelines to determine their success or failure. Additionally, there is typically one participant who takes on the role of the Dungeon Master (DM). The DM is responsible for narrating the game's plot, portraying non-player characters, and making judgments on the participants' behavior during the game. Following the predetermined script and rules, the dungeon master provides the other players with oral and interpretive virtual situations. The DM possesses a manual specific to the game setting known as the DM manual, which is used to plan the participants' routes and events throughout the game. When a random event arises that requires judgment, a random system is typically employed, such as rolling dice, to ensure that the game maintains an element of mystery and is not solely influenced by the individual intentions of the DM. This early distinction between player-controlled characters and system-controlled characters continues to inform contemporary understandings of NPCs as entities that mediate between game rules, narrative structure and players' experiences (Warpefelt, 2016).

In the realm of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), the traditional role of the Dungeon Master (DM) has been incorporated into the overall computer game system. Through the implementation of computer science mechanisms, the need for a DM and DM manuals has been replaced. Instead, the rules governing the virtual world are established and enforced by the software, and the behaviors of avatars are evaluated through software-based random calculations rather than the subjective rulings of a DM. At the same time, advances in artificial intelligence and procedural

design have allowed NPCs to exhibit increasingly varied behaviours, making them appear more autonomous and responsive in large-scale online worlds (Azad & Martens, 2021; Aydın et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the software utilized in online games allows for the inclusion of a diverse range of Non-Player Characters (NPCs) that extend beyond mere narrative elements. These NPCs assume various roles and can be encountered throughout the virtual world, offering players a wide range of functionalities. Bartle (2004) devised a typology outlining the functional roles fulfilled by NPCs. This typology encompasses the following classifications:

- Buy, sell and make stuff.
- Provide services.
- Guard places.
- Get killed for loot.
- Dispense quests (or clues of other NPCs' quests).
- Supply background information (history, lore, cultural attitudes).
- Do stuff for players.
- Make the place look busy.

- (Bartle 2004)

Bartle's seminal work provides the most comprehensive examination of how Non-Player Characters (NPCs) can fulfill supportive roles within a game. Building upon his typology, we have categorized NPCs in online games into three primary classifications: functional, friendly, and hostile.

However, we have made adjustments to the original functional classification, deviating from the initial one-to-one mapping. It is now recognized that a single type of NPC may serve multiple functions, while different types of NPCs may share the same function. One notable case is the inclusion of NPCs to create a sense of bustling activity within the game world. Bartle (2004) designates NPCs fulfilling this function as a distinct category, positing that their purpose is solely to populate the virtual environment. Typically, their ability to interact with players is limited, as is their repertoire of behaviors.

Nevertheless, in contemporary online games, NPCs often serve additional functions beyond mere occupancy. Characters who appear common or inconsequential may possess vital clues within a particular storyline. Conversely, a significant number of placeholder NPCs may lack relevance to the game and its players. However, maintaining their presence incurs substantial program capacity and server load costs. Consequently, with the advancement of online gaming, such NPCs are gradually phased out. As a result, the creation of a bustling atmosphere has become a default feature of most NPCs. Table 1 presents an overview of the general classification and corresponding functions, which we will elaborate upon in the subsequent discussion.

Category	Function
Functional	Buy, sell and make stuff.
	Provide services.
	Dispense Quests (or clues of other NPCs' quests).
Friendly	Do stuff for players.
	Supply background information (history, lore, cultural attitudes).
Hostile	Guard places.
	Get killed for loot.

Table 1 Categories and functions of NPC

Functional

Functional NPCs provide the players with services that are needed to make the game playable (Warpefelt, 2016). They are usually shown as *merchants*, *vendors* and *quest giver*.

Merchants mainly provide the function of *buy, Sell and make Stuff*. They usually sell the required game items (see section 2.3.3 for the detailed classification) and allow players to sell what they don't need to obtain in-game currency. Merchants are

important of the currency circulation in the virtual world, as one of the main ways for avatars to obtain in-game currency is selling through merchants, and merchants, as NPCs constructed by the game system, always have enough money to afford those items.

Vendors have similar functions to merchants. Instead of game items, vendors sell the in-game services to avatars, such as repairing the avatar's items, stabling their pets and transporting them to other places. Similar to merchants, vendors are also an important part of in-game currency circulation, but they are mainly responsible for the recovery of in-game currency, so as to stabilize prices in in-game market and prevent inflation/deflation caused by too much/too little currency acquisition by avatars.

Quest giver handles the quest aspects of the game. They tend to be associated with the growth of avatars. They may give avatars quests, transport them to where the quest takes place, or provide them with a doohickey (magical or otherwise) that allows them to complete the quest. If the game has multi-part quest chains, they will also act as checkpoints as the avatars advance along the quest chain (Warpefelt, 2016). By completing their published quests, avatars can gain EXPs and game items, learn or enhance skills, enhance personal attributes, and grow in other aspects. Through these repeated interactions around services, trade and quests, functional NPCs become routine contact points that structure how players acquire resources and progress, which later also shapes patterns of gifting and exchange between players.

Friendly

The main role of friendly NPCs is to *do stuff for players* and *supply background information (history, lore, cultural attitudes)*. Other types of NPCs may also have the function of friendly NPCs. For example, for vendors, it is possible to do stuff for players in the services they provide. But friendly NPCs tend to focus on both. For the former, more common examples are allies, pets, and employees. They can help avatars fight, gather, or produce. The latter can provide avatars with knowledge about the world view of the game, so that players can have a better understanding of the background stories

of the virtual world. Companion-type NPCs in particular have been shown to support attachment, trust and social bonding, blurring the line between tools and social partners in players' experiences (Azad & Martens, 2021; Aydin et al., 2023).

Hostile

Hostile NPCs are the enemies that avatars fight in the game world. By defeating them avatars can earn money and items in the virtual world. They usually *guard the places* that avatars would enter to complete quests or get rare game items. If NPCs are attackable in a game, they will almost always transition into this type when attacked. The hostile NPCs in the game have levels of difficulty to distinguish. Games usually choose to fight with enemies of their avatars' level or a little below them. When facing some more powerful enemies, players are required to form groups or teams to cooperate. This more powerful type of hostile NPCs is called Boss, and by defeating Boss avatars could be rewarded more handsomely. Hostile NPCs therefore not only provide challenge but also act as important generators of loot and rare items, feeding into in-game economies and the subsequent circulation of virtual goods between players.

Irrespective of their classification, NPCs in online games are expected to fulfill their roles effectively and provide players with a sense of immersion. The authenticity of these non-human characters is crucial for the success of online games. Unlike in tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) where the game master (GM) dictates every aspect, NPCs in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) introduce an element of randomness. Game designers create the game's programming, but they do not possess complete control over the actions of every object within the virtual world they have crafted. While they establish the mechanics governing gameplay, they cannot anticipate every possible outcome resulting from these mechanics in any given moment.

Software engineering provides the foundation for online gaming, with the game system serving as the cognitive entity. It "thinks" and "judges" based on the current situation. Only when something occurs beyond its programmed capabilities does

computer science enter the picture, requiring debugging. NPCs, as the primary means of communication and interaction between players and their avatars in the virtual world, play a critical role in connecting the game system with players. Essentially, the game system engages in a series of behaviors prompted by players' interactions with NPCs. NPCs can be seen as representatives of the game system, embodying both the capacity of the game system itself and their own human-like virtual nature. In this thesis, these system-controlled characters are therefore treated as computer-generated entities that participate alongside human players in the networks of interaction, exchange and conflict examined in later chapters. This intricate relationship will be thoroughly explored in Chapter 7.

2.3.3. Game Items

Game items in online games can be seen as the equivalent of “props” that avatars can possess. Distinguishing them from real-world possessions, game items are conceptual rather than tangible objects within the game world. Furthermore, they differ from digital assets such as music and videos, as game items lack a distinct “entity” even in the virtual environment. Their existence solely relies on their acquisition and utilization by avatars and NPCs, without being influenced by factors like quality or quantity. For instance, if an avatar discards or loses an item, it will eventually vanish rather than remaining on the ground until someone retrieves it. Typically, these items are represented as icons within the “inventory” or “bag” interface. Players perceive these props as objects primarily due to their value, as game items are designed to enhance the interaction between players and the game. They offer functional, decorative, and social value to players, ultimately enhancing the user experience within the virtual world (Hamari & Keronen, 2017). In this sense, game items can be understood as forms of digital possessions that support not only instrumental play but also identity expression, distinction and social signalling within online communities (Hamari & Keronen, 2017; Alkhawwari, 2024). Based on their value, game items are commonly categorized into two main types: functional items and non-functional items.

Functional items are items within the virtual environment that avatars can utilize to

enhance their abilities. These items are often subject to specific class or avatar level requirements and are categorized based on their quality into various ranks. Examples of functional items in online games include equipment, consumables, and collections. Equipment encompasses weapons and armors that grant avatars additional attributes. Unlike items that can only be stored in an inventory, equipment can be equipped in specific slots (see Figure 3). The attributes of equipment are tailored to suit different class roles. Each piece of equipment possesses an “equipment level,” with higher-level equipment offering more supplementary attributes. The overall strength of an avatar, denoted as “gear,” is determined by the average level of all equipped equipment. Basic equipment can be obtained through functional NPCs or as rewards for completing quests. On the other hand, advanced and rare equipment can only be acquired by defeating Bosses.



Figure 3 Equipment slots in *World of Warcraft*

Source: Image from the blog post “Feral druid macros in Warlords of Draenor” on *File Under Feral*.

Consumable items are props that avatars can utilize within the virtual environment.

These items encompass a wide range of virtual counterparts for real-world consumables, including raw materials and finished products. As conceptual objects, consumable items can be accumulated in the avatar's inventory, with numerical values indicating their quantity. Each count represents one available usage. Avatars have the option to purchase consumable items from functional NPCs or obtain them as loot from hostile NPCs.

Collections refer to the mounts and other items that avatars gather throughout their adventures. Positioned between functional and non-functional items, collections do not directly enhance avatar statistics. However, many of them offer additional functions, such as increasing the avatar's movement speed or enabling flight. Some collections are available for purchase from merchants at high prices or are rewards for rare quests or defeating rare enemies. Additionally, players can obtain certain collections through real-money transactions (RMT), wherein they purchase them from game producers' online stores. Rare collections and prestige items often become markers of achievement and status, circulating in player narratives and social comparison even when their mechanical impact is limited (Hamari & Keronen, 2017).

Non-functional items Non-functional items are items in online games that do not impact the attributes of avatars but rather alter their appearance. These items are not restricted and can be used by avatars of any class and level. Unlike functional items, non-functional items have a more conceptual nature, such as clothing sets, hairstyles, or makeup looks. In MMORPGs, only a small portion of non-functional items can be obtained in-game, with the majority being purchased through real-money transactions (RMT) from in-game malls. Cosmetic items and skins are central to how players present themselves to others and align with particular styles, groups or trends, which links them closely to practices of display, gifting and exchange in many online environments (Hamari & Keronen, 2017; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024).

Both functional and non-functional items hold social value within the virtual world. In addition to the interaction between the virtual environment and avatars, the

acquisition of game items also involves interactions among avatars themselves. In the early stages of MMORPGs, similar to the emergence and development of social production, the environment or nature was the sole source of obtaining game items when avatars first entered the virtual world. As avatars progressed and reached higher levels during their adventures, they would acquire new items, materials, and formulas, improving their efficiency in obtaining items. As production materials accumulated and surplus occurred, avatars began to engage in exchanges based on their needs. This process led to various game items reflecting differences in supply and demand due to avatars' collecting and consuming speeds. The intentional gathering of game items resembled the acquisition of scarce resources, thus promoting division of labor.

In contrast to ancient societies, the presence of currency in the virtual world normalized trade much earlier. However, the use value of virtual items proved difficult to measure due to the unstable supply and demand relationship, and it took considerable time for pricing among players to be established through social practice. Simultaneously, the lag in information dissemination delayed the spread of a relatively complete pricing system, resulting in a prolonged period for a mature online market to take shape. With the continuous development of social practices in production and consumption, communication among players will become increasingly frequent and close, leading to the formation of social clusters. These emergent in-game economies and player-driven markets form an important backdrop for practices such as trading, bartering and gifting, in which items circulate not only for their functional benefits but also as tokens of reciprocity, obligation and social ties.

However, a completely unrestricted exchange market in a virtual environment can also give rise to certain issues. In online games, avatar progression is often a long-term goal for players. If rare items, which require significant effort to obtain, can be freely exchanged, it can lower the threshold for acquiring them, thereby diminishing the sense of accomplishment when players finally obtain them. Moreover, the exchange of currency between the online and offline worlds can lead to a greater reliance on real-

world wealth for obtaining rare items, thus significantly impacting fairness within the virtual world. To address these concerns, MMORPGs now incorporate binding mechanisms. Depending on the type of binding, an item may be exchanged before being equipped or it may not be exchangeable at all. These mechanisms are commonly referred to as Bind on Equip (BOE) and Bind on Pickup (BOP). BOE items become bound to an avatar once they are equipped, but can still be exchanged to another avatar as long as it has not been used. On the other hand, BOP items become bound to the avatar that loots them and cannot be exchanged to any other avatars. Both mechanisms are primarily used for rare items.

In comparison to functional items, the market for non-functional items in online games bears closer resemblance to the real world. Similar to tangible goods like clothing and makeup, game producers often release limited editions of non-functional items that need to be quickly obtained. Despite the intangible nature of these items, consumers are still willing to purchase them for their avatars. For players who are unsuccessful in purchasing these limited items, they often resort to exchanging with others within the in-game or out-game community to obtain what they desire, thereby driving the development of the corresponding market. Such exchanges may involve direct trade, informal gift-giving or negotiated swaps, and they frequently draw on broader patterns of online gifting and monetised virtual goods observed in other digital settings such as livestreaming and social media platforms (Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024). In this thesis, these item-based interactions provide the material basis for examining how virtual gifting practices and other forms of reciprocity emerge within MMORPG communities.

2.4. Playability of MMORPG

2.4.1. Progression

Upon the completion of the avatar creation process, players' avatars venture into the virtual realm to embark on their adventurous exploits. Within this virtual environment, avatars become immersed in a series of legendary events, enabling players to partake

in thrilling quests from their avatar's unique perspective. Unlike the grandiose heroes found in epic tales, avatars in MMORPGs assume the role of ordinary individuals. As a result, players often find themselves more emotionally connected to the personal growth and development of their avatars. This sustained attachment to an evolving avatar has also been linked to the development of social ties and emotional support networks within MMORPG communities (Grinyer et al., 2022; Choi & Williams, 2025).

In MMORPGs, the advancement of player characters is primarily driven by their progression through various levels. Typically, the character progression system of MMORPGs allows players to acquire experience points (EXP) by controlling their avatar's actions and utilizing these EXP to increase their avatar's "level," thereby enhancing their overall performance in all activities (Mulligan & Patrovsky, 2003). The acquisition of EXP is predominantly achieved by vanquishing hostile non-player characters (NPCs) and successfully completing quests assigned by friendly NPCs. This gameplay mechanic of accumulating EXP to advance levels not only provides players with a clear and tangible objective but also delivers immediate feedback on the growth of their avatars. Consequently, it serves as an effective incentive model for players (Yee et al., 2011). Contemporary research on social gaming similarly highlights level-based progression and structured feedback as key drivers of sustained engagement and collaborative play in online worlds (Gonçalves, Sousa, & Nisi, 2023).

The mechanics of early online games were relatively simplistic in nature. Prior to the introduction of quest mechanisms, players primarily devoted their time to defeating enemies and leveling up, a concept commonly referred to as "magic find" (MF). To increase player engagement, game systems intentionally imposed significant challenges on reaching the highest levels, thereby prolonging the process of avatar improvement. In certain MMORPGs, there is no limit to a player's level, allowing the MF process to continue indefinitely. MMORPGs that adopt this model often celebrate top-ranked players by displaying their avatars on the game's website or showcasing their stats on a high-score screen. Nevertheless, these games often suffer from monotony as avatars are

confined to a repetitive cycle of MF and leveling.

To enhance the overall consumer experience, subsequent game releases incorporated a diverse range of additional content. The traditional “fight and level up” model gradually gave way to a combination of quests and dungeons, which offered substantial experience rewards. In modern MMORPGs, it has become common practice to set a maximum reachable level for all players, commonly referred to as a level cap. Attaining the maximum level is now regarded as just the beginning. Avatars can only confront the most formidable enemies and explore the most challenging dungeons once they have reached the level cap specified by the particular game version. Once the level cap is achieved, the definition of a player's progression undergoes a transformation. Instead of primarily being rewarded with experience from MF, the player's motivation to continue playing is replaced with the pursuit of accumulating wealth and obtaining superior equipment. The expanded range of equipment available at the maximum level often possesses increased aesthetic value, serving as a means to distinguish high-ranking players in-game from their lower-ranking counterparts. Colloquially known as “endgame gear,” this collection of empowered weapons and armor adds a competitive edge to both scripted boss encounters and player-versus-player combat. Player motivation to outperform others is fueled by acquiring such items and becomes a significant determining factor in their success or failure in combat-related situations.

Furthermore, apart from combat, MMORPGs also feature gameplay elements related to production. Avatars have the ability to acquire life skills such as gathering and crafting, allowing them to collect materials and create in-game items. Additionally, there is a plethora of casual content, including card games or other relaxing activities, available for those seeking respite from combat. Above all, the virtual worlds in MMORPGs offer a high degree of freedom, enabling players to truly experience a sense of second life through the perspectives of their avatars. These layered forms of progression also help explain why MMORPGs are frequently discussed as social laboratories that can support well-being, reciprocity, and continued participation over

time (Kim, 2025; Wu & Chang, 2025).

2.4.2. Mechanisms

MMORPGs are a combination of role-play games and massively multiplayer online game. It offers a three-dimensional virtual world that is typically represented by large, sophisticated, detailed and evolving spaces that form different narrative environments, in which a very large number of players interact with one another (Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell 2003). Player assumes the role of a character (often in the background of a fantasy world) by creating an avatar and takes control over many of its actions. MMORPGs are distinguished from single-player or small multi-player online RPGs by the number of participants able to interact together, and by the game's persistent virtual world (usually hosted by the game's publisher), which continues to exist and evolve while the participants are offline and away from the game (Castranova 2008).

Players of MMORPG must firstly accomplish preparatory steps to gain access to the game environment, including the gaming client software on PC, the register of gaming account and the payment of playing times. The first step after login is to create an avatar. An avatar is the graphic representation of the consumer's virtual self through which s/he interacts with other players/avatars in the virtual game environment (Galanxhi and Nah 2007). Consumers could create avatars according to their own preferences, determining the avatar's name, gender, appearance, voice and how it is clothed. Avatars as a "vehicle of the self" are the inhabitants of virtual worlds (Castranova 2003). In addition to avatars, there are characters that are simulated by the server software called non-player characters (NPCs) which do not differ in their graphic representation from the avatars created by the players. NPCs are designed with artificial intelligence to offer a rich and unpredictable milieu for players to experience a virtual world through their own avatars. Together, avatars and NPCs structure the interactional possibilities in the game world and create the conditions under which cooperation, competition and exchanges around virtual items can occur.

Player vs Environment: cooperation and transaction

Interaction is one of the most important aspects in online games (Lewinski 2000; Mithra 1998). It is defined as the behavior of communicating with two or more objects and affecting each other (Laurel 2013). According to Choi and Kim (2004), the interactions in MMORPG could be classified into “individual interaction” and “social interaction”. The former represents the relationships between consumers and objects, while the latter mainly tell the story of interactions and communications between consumers. It is through these interactions that players improve their avatars and explore the virtual world. Later studies of multiplayer online games similarly emphasize interaction as the basis of social capital, mutual support and emergent communities in persistent game worlds (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Gonçalves, Sousa, & Nisi, 2023).

Individual interaction refers to the interaction between players and the gaming system. Such interaction has been found to have a substantial impact on the popularity of games. This is because a successful gaming experience requires a set of several sequences of interaction as a narrative or storytelling used to construct a player’s experience in online games (Ju and Wagner 1997; Lewinski 2000; Eskelinen 2001; Cummins 2002). In MMORPG, players get rewards of “Experience Points (EXPs)” that their avatars could accumulate to improve levels, leading to improved abilities and skills. As a result, the whole gaming process of MMORPG can be divided into two periods: leveling period and full-level period. The former is a period in which players gain EXPs to improve levels, which often serves as a process of gradually unlocking and understanding the gaming mechanisms. Once avatars achieve the highest level, players will be able to experience the fully unlocked gaming mechanisms and start to experience a different gaming environment.

Social interaction refers to the interaction between players. although such an interaction may also emerge in leveling period, e.g., players may cooperate to fight enemies, social interactions mainly occur in the full-level period. Usually for players in MMORPG, they need to obtain goods like “equipment” (armors and weapons) and

“items” (magic scrolls and bombs) through individual interactions in the game, for instance, killing an enemy NPC or completing a friendly NPC’s mission, which could also be used to improve avatar’s abilities and skills. However, as the enemies will become so strong that an individual avatar alone is not able to defeat, teamwork becomes essential and players will form groups and teams to challenge the NPC enemies and the BOSS (the strongest enemies). We call this mechanism as “Player VS Environment (PVE)”. As millions of players interact and collaborate, social relationships begin to form between the players represented by their avatars in online environments every day. Besides, as players accumulate more and more virtual possessions, they tend to exchange the redundant goods by giving them as gifts to their online friends, or exchanging these goods with other players. These exchanges mark the emergence of an online marketplace. The social interaction that facilitates improvement mainly present as teamwork, including communications and cooperation between players to fight against bigger monsters, and goods transactions, including giving behaviours and exchange, both of which have made online gaming inherently social (Cole and Griffiths 2007). In this sense, PVE encounters and associated item flows provide an important arena in which cooperative norms, informal gifting and reciprocal exchanges are established and maintained within MMORPG communities (Hamari & Keronen, 2017; Bisberg et al., 2022).

Player vs Player: Competition and Conflict

Another mechanism of MMORPG is called “Player vs Player (PVP)”. Rather than being content with the relatively same NPC enemies, players in PVP combat with each other, a more complex and intelligent opponent. They study the effects of combinations of different skills and hone their skills in real competitions. As a result, the social interactions are intensified from cooperation to competition.

As avatars fight each other, conflicts emerge. The PVP mechanism enables players to earn rewards through such interactions. For instance, players could get special currencies by attacking others, and on some special occasions they could even get

others' possessions through these attacks. Besides, conflicts could also rise from the individual level to the collective level. In the world of MMORPG, players engage in PVP must choose between two opposing factions, and the players of the opposite faction could be attacked with no limitations in most of the areas in the gaming world. But sometimes players invade others not for their possessions or rewards but just for fun, and some players would also attack others regardless of the factions. Research on conflict and antisocial behaviour in online games has shown that such confrontational encounters can range from structured competition to harassment, griefing and other forms of "toxic" play that nonetheless contribute to group identities and shared narratives (Kowert, 2020; Zsila & Demetrovics, 2025).

These malicious behaviours should stem from the very few restrictions online games impose on the virtual world. According to Yee (2006) and Lehdonvirta (2012), the virtual world and its components are no less real or able to satisfy the desires of consumers. The virtual world confers social status and standing in human society (Castronova, 2001), however, unlike real life where rules and laws discipline social members' behaviours, online virtual worlds continue to be seen as spaces that offer players the possibility to escape their own 'real' lives and the pressures that they are facing every day. As it allows the players to express themselves in ways that they may not feel comfortable with in real life (Herold 2012), the lawless virtual environment make their thoughts amplified and easily behave against good faith with comparatively much lower cost of crime. Thus, online gaming also provides a rich context to advance existing research that attends to the role of consumption in aiding the dark side of human nature. The PVP mechanisms in MMORPGs therefore not only create competitive challenges but also open up spaces where power, status, humiliation and revenge can be negotiated through digitally mediated acts, including the circulation, loss and destruction of virtual goods.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the key aspects of virtual

worlds and MMORPGs. We began by introducing the concept of virtual worlds and highlighting their significance in the realm of online gaming. We then delved into the definition of MMORPGs, outlining the fundamental components that make up these immersive gaming experiences. The discussion on the playability of MMORPGs shed light on the various factors that contribute to the popularity and social meaning of in-game activities in the virtual world. Overall, this chapter has offered a solid foundation for understanding the intricacies and appeal of MMORPGs, with particular attention to avatars, NPCs and game items as core elements of the virtual environment. These components and mechanisms provide the contextual background for the following chapters, where virtual gifting practices and interactions between human players and computer-generated entities are examined in greater depth.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Introduction

This chapter serves as the theoretical backbone of the study, offering a comprehensive review of the existing literature on gift exchange and its evolution across various contexts, including traditional societies, consumer behavior, and digital environments. The review begins by exploring the foundational concepts of gift-giving, focusing on classical anthropological theories such as Mauss's (1925) seminal work on reciprocity and social obligations, as well as Malinowski's (1922) analysis of the kula exchange. These early studies highlight the role of gifts in fostering social solidarity and establishing moral frameworks. The chapter then transitions to examining the tension between gift and commodity exchange, addressing the dichotomy proposed by Gregory (1982) and the subsequent critiques that argue for a more integrative understanding (e.g., Parry & Bloch, 1989; Morris, 1986). This section underscores how gift exchange systems operate beyond purely economic transactions, often intertwining symbolic and material values. Further, the literature on gift-giving in consumer research is discussed, particularly through Sherry's (1983) processual model, which identifies the social, personal, and economic dimensions of gifting. Building on this foundation, the chapter then moves into contemporary work on digital gifting and virtual economies, where the intangible nature of virtual gifts raises questions about how far classical theories can be stretched (e.g., Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Alkhawwari, 2024; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). In this context, virtual gifts and computer-generated entities (CGEs) are treated as part of an evolving gift system rather than as merely instrumental digital commodities. By integrating perspectives from gift exchange theory with object-oriented ontology and Actor-Network Theory (ANT), the chapter examines how non-human entities, such as avatars and in-game items participate in and reshape gifting practices in online worlds. Finally, the chapter identifies gaps in existing literature, particularly in the contexts of hybrid reciprocity, the dark side of gift-giving, and more explicitly adversarial forms of exchange in digital

environments. These gaps provide the conceptual space for this thesis to develop a stronger account of how gift logics are extended, strained, and sometimes radically inverted within MMORPG settings.

3.2. Gift system and reciprocity

Gift giving is an intriguing, universal behavior that has yet to be interpreted satisfactorily by social scientists (Cheal, 1988; Godbout and Caille, 1998; Graeber, 2001). It constitutes one of the most important modes of social exchange in human societies (Yan, 2012). Adding up to more than just an aggregate of dyadic exchanges, gift giving becomes a “total social fact” that affects the economic, legal, political, and religious spheres of society and fulfills important functions in their development and continuity (Giesler, 2006). The gift system pervades all aspects of archaic society and works to build not just wealth and alliances but also social solidarity within and between the tribes. Gift exchange has long been considered a fundamental social system in classic anthropological and sociological studies (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1925). Anthropological research into gift exchange began with the distinction of two exchange models on whether the object exchanged was valued for its economic worth or its symbolic worth (Belk, 1983), which was articulated on the context of kula circle of the Trobriand Islands off eastern Papua New Guinea. In the kula circle, the two most significant types of gifts (arm bands and necklaces) circulate in two different directions between trading partners situated on different islands. Recipients of these gifts are obligated to give them away to the next trading partner within a year or risk being considered misers, rather than keeping and using them. Malinowski (1922) first proposed the dichotomous notion of gift versus commodity, whereby gift exchange must be understood as an oppositional economy to that of market exchange. He viewed the kula circle as a recognizable and sensible mode of exchange. By proposing a model that represented exchange as essentially dyadic transactions between self-interested individuals, and as dependent on balance, Malinowski (1922) emphasized the exchange of goods among individuals and their selfish motives for gifting, as they expected a

return of equal or greater value.

However, the unitary view of exchange has been challenged and caused a debate that quickly established the complexity of gift exchange. Mauss (1925) published his work, *The Gift*, which laid the theoretical foundation for a contemporary interpretation of gift giving. Unlike Malinowski's unitary view that exchange was like rational and interested transactions by independent individuals, Mauss focused on gift exchange in "primitive" societies and sought answers from indigenous belief systems. He argued that social exchange begins with total prestations, in which the materials transferred between groups are only part of a larger range of non-economic transfers. The gifts were not between individuals, but between representatives of larger collectives, and were a total prestation, a service provided out of obligation. They embodied the reputation, history, and identity of a "corporate kin group," creating a social bond with an obligation to reciprocate on the part of the recipient (Mauss, 1925).

Mauss synthesized the gift system by identifying three obligations: giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Giving is fundamental to relationships because it creates obligations among individuals. Those who fail to give are considered outcasts of the social life. Receiving is also obligatory because refusing creates conflicts and prevents the possibility of a relationship. The most important obligation is that of returning, which raises the question: "What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?" Mauss attributes the obligation of reciprocity to the Maori concept of hau, which is a mystical power that resides in the forest and in the valuables (taonga) exchanged between individuals. The hau always seeks to return to its origin, but can only do so through an object given in exchange for the initial gift. Failure to return a gift can result in serious consequences, including the death of the recipient. Mauss argues that it is the hau in the gift that compels the recipient to make a return, and he terms this the "spirit of the gift." Giving creates obligations among consumers, which shape social relationships. These exchange relationships are central to social relations without centralized authority and continue to redefine social relations over time.

(Carrier, 2005; Ruth, Cele, & Frederic, 1999).

Instead of accepting Mauss's interpretation of the Maori hau, many anthropologists have utilized the concept of inalienability to account for the presence of spiritual and non-utilitarian ties between gift-giver and recipient. Damon (1980), for example, contends that all kula valuables, which are brought into the exchange by specific individuals, constitute those individuals' inalienable kitoum. Similarly, Gregory (1980) develops comparable arguments in his analysis of the distinction between gift-debt relations and commodity-debt relations. According to Gregory, gift debts entail the transfer of inalienable objects between mutually dependent parties, while commodity debts arise from the exchange of alienable objects among independent actors. The notion of inalienability regarding gift-giving was further developed by Weiner (1992), who contrasts "moveable goods" that can be traded with "immoveable goods" that act as a means of drawing the gifts back. In the Trobriand case, for instance, male Kula gifts are associated with women's landed property. Weiner argues that the goods given, much like crown jewels, are so intimately linked with specific groups that even when they are given, they are not truly alienable. Such goods rely on the presence of specific types of kinship groups within society. However, it should be noted that Weiner actually accepts Mauss's viewpoint on the hau. 'The hau as a life force embedded in the person is transmitted to the person's possessions' and thus adds inalienable value to the objects (Weiner, 1992: 63).

However, dissenting voices have been present throughout. The anthropology of the gift was long dominated by the issue of the principle of reciprocity, which first emerged as a critique of the Maussian notion of the spirit of the gift. Malinowski (1926) argued that reciprocity is an implicit part of gifting, and there is no free gift without expectation. Rejecting Mauss's interpretation of the spirit of the gift, Malinowski articulated the principle of reciprocity to explain the local system of economic transactions. He argued that the binding force of economic obligations lies in the sanction which either side may invoke to sever the bonds of reciprocity. One gives because of the expectation of return

and one returns because of the threat that one's partner may stop giving. All rights and obligations are 'arranged into well-balanced chains of reciprocal services' (Malinowski, 1926). He thus concluded that the principle of reciprocity was the foundation of Melanesian social order.

The notion of the hau as advanced by Mauss was subject to further critique by Marshall Sahlins. In his work, Sahlins (1972) offers a reanalysis of Mauss's (1925/2000) concept of gift-giving, proposing that gift exchange is driven by the desires of individuals and/or groups rather than by sacred motivations. Contrary to Mauss's assertion that the hau is primarily a sacred principle, Sahlins (1972) proposes that it is a productive principle grounded in the Maori recognition of the natural productivity of nature. However, the gift also represents creative activity, embodying the efforts of specific agents. As such, gift circulation is motivated by the desire of individuals and groups to reduce or moderate their dependence on the creative power of others, as manifested in the gift. It is crucial to note that this type of society does not envision individual gain at others' expense. Instead, individuals gain in honor and prestige as much through others' failure to engage in generous expenditure as through their own. Any advantage or gain must be explicitly acknowledged through a return.

In his attempt to demonstrate the universality of reciprocity, Sahlins (1972) distinguishes between three types of reciprocity: generalized, balanced, and negative. Generalized reciprocity refers to an exchange of goods and/or services where the parties involved do not keep an exact account of the value or stipulate the amount or duration of the return. Rather, it is expected that the exchange will balance itself over time. Balanced reciprocity obliges the recipient to return items of equal value within a specific time frame. Compared to generalized reciprocity, social ties between the gift giver and recipient are weaker in balanced reciprocity, and in the event of non-reciprocation, this relation further weakens (Skågeby, 2010). Negative reciprocity involves exchanges where one party seeks to act entirely in their self-interest, pursuing material gain or profit. While generalized reciprocity tips the balance in favor of selfless

giving without immediate expectation of return, negative reciprocity does the opposite. Sahlins (1972) refers to this as the “unsociable extreme” because it is mostly conducted between strangers rather than between friends or kin. Negative reciprocity in this classical sense therefore marks the limit of exploitative or one-sided exchange within the gift system, but it still presupposes an exchange framework rather than outright theft or disappearance of relations.

However, Sahlins work on reciprocity has weakness, as less attention has been paid to the variable relationship between monetary and non-monetary exchange. David Graeber argues that balanced gift exchange and market exchange have more in common than normally assumed. Since both are balanced, the social relationship created through the sense of debt and obligation is constantly in danger of being ended by the return gift/exchange. He thinks it better to contrast “open” and “closed” reciprocity. Open reciprocity “keeps no accounts because it implies a relation of permanent mutual commitment.” This open reciprocity is closed off precisely when it is balanced. Thought of in this way, we can see the relationship as a matter of degree, more or less open or closed. Closed reciprocity of gifts is most like market exchange. It is competitive, individualistic and may border on barter. This reframing underscores that reciprocity is not a set of fixed types but a continuum of practices whose openness or closure has consequences for how relationships are initiated, maintained, or terminated.

In addition, the discussion of negative reciprocity ignores a further step towards the negative aspect of exchange. Negative reciprocity, as described by Sahlins (1972), refers to exchanges where one party seeks to maximize their gain while minimizing their contribution, often to the detriment of the other. Unlike balanced reciprocity, which emphasizes fairness, or generalized reciprocity, which relies on altruism, negative reciprocity is characterized by a strategic pursuit of personal benefit. It is most often observed in contexts of bartering, distant relationships, or adversarial interactions. In the realm of gift-giving, negative reciprocity manifests when gifts are given with explicit or implicit expectations of disproportionate returns. For instance, Komter (1996)

describes how gifts can be strategically employed to impose obligations on recipients, creating a power dynamic where the giver holds a superior position. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of symbolic violence further illustrates how gifts can be used to assert dominance, making recipients feel indebted or inferior. While these practices may not always be malicious, they reveal how gifts can function as instruments of control and exploitation. Existing anthropological and consumer research therefore already recognizes that reciprocity can become asymmetrical, strategic, and even coercive, while still formally taking place within a recognizable gift exchange.

However, there is a dark side of the gift (Sherry, 1996; Sherry, McGrath, and Levi, 1993). The concept of "dark gift" refers to a creative form of gift that has bad intention covered in a kind appearance (Hyde, 1979). Previous research has noted other negative aspects of gift-giving. Belk (1976;1979) found there were tensions in one-sided exchanges, even in gifts of agapic love (Belk and Coon 1993). Giesler (2006) even noted theft in the gift system of music and file sharing. Gifts may evoke negative relations (Ruth et al. 1999), anxiety (Wooten, 2000), and indebtedness (Morales, 2005; Giesler, 2006; Joy, 2001). Weiner (1992) described the case of "Moka Exchange" in which gifts played the role of tributes between tribes that were exchanged in attempts to humiliate the recipients. Those who couldn't afford the return gifts would lose their social status and suffer infamy among members of archaic society. Such exchange is marked by symbolic violence. Sherry, McGrath and Levy (1993) also noted that responses of gifts, revealing some of the ambivalence and contradiction experienced by gift participants as it related to their private lives and to the context of the organized marketplace. Marcoux (2009) discussed the implication of dark side of the gift in market and argued that people may turn to the market as an escape. Such research on the dark side of the gift suggests that gift giving may be used as a means of exerting power over others or even oppressing them. Previous researches on dark side of gift mostly distinguish positive and negative reciprocity and its effect on consumers, relationships and markets. At the same time, this body of work largely remains within

situations where the surface form of the gift is preserved, and where harm or domination emerges through obligation, debt, or symbolic violence rather than through the deliberate infliction of loss. Little attention has been paid to the completely subverted gift. This part will be further discussed in section 3.5.

3.3. Gift Exchange vs. Commodity Exchange

The relationship between new market exchange systems and indigenous non-market exchange has long been a perplexing question for anthropologists. Karl Polanyi (1957) introduced the fundamental theory of exchange modes, which identified and defined three modes of exchange: reciprocal, redistributive, and market. These modes of exchange are observed either individually or in combination within the economic organizations of diverse societies worldwide. Despite the complexities involved in their analysis, these modes are capable of clear and evident definition, and they subsume all types of exchange recognized in any given society. Reciprocity refers to obligatory gift exchange, redistribution pertains to obligatory payment to an allocative center, and market exchange involves purchase and sale with reference to a price system. Any transfers or transactions that cannot be included in these categories are considered illegitimate or wrong by a society. Recent discussions of exchange systems draw on Polanyi's framework to show how reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange often co-exist within the same social formations, including contemporary digital and platform-based economies (Harvey, 2020; Yan, 2020).

In light of Karl Polanyi's (1957) theory of three modes of exchange, Sahlins suggests that the relations and values that characterize gift exchange and commodity exchange should not be viewed as opposite poles, but rather as extreme points on a continuum (Sahlins, 1972: 191-7). The primary determinant is the degree of kinship: "Reciprocity is inclined toward the generalized pole by close kinship, toward the negative extreme in proportion to kinship distance" (Sahlins, 1972: 196). In other words, people tend to exchange gifts among close kin and commodities among non-kin. Building on this continuum approach, more recent syntheses likewise emphasize movement along a

spectrum from gift-like to commodity-like relations rather than hard boundaries between distinct “gift” and “market” spheres (Sprenger, 2023; Yan, 2020).

At the point where gift-giving and market exchange intersected for the first time, some anthropologists viewed them as polar opposites. Gregory (1982) presents a binary formulation of a gift economy in clan-based societies versus a commodity economy in class-based societies. According to him, commodity exchange involves the exchange of alienable objects between individuals who are in a state of reciprocal independence, establishing a quantitative relationship between the objects exchanged. In contrast, gift exchange involves the exchange of inalienable objects between individuals in a state of reciprocal dependence, establishing a qualitative relationship between the transactors. The true distinction between gifts and commodities, therefore, is rooted in the different orders of social relations that are constructed and mediated through the exchange of objects.

For those who prioritize the inalienable features of gift exchange, the distinction between gifts and commodities remains crucial. Strathern (1992) argues that gift exchange differs fundamentally from barter or commodity exchange, as the value of gifts is assessed qualitatively rather than quantitatively, as is the case with commodities. She notes that Melanesian gift exchange is based on “the capacity for actors (agents, subjects) to extract or elicit from others items that then become the object of their relationship” (Marilyn, 1992: 177). Similarly, Weiner (1992) contends that “inalienable possessions attain absolute value that is subjectively constituted and distinct from the exchange value of commodities or the abstract value of money.”

However, other anthropologists have rejected the notion that these different “exchange spheres” are polar opposites. Damon (1982) highlights that while the kula ring is not a system of commodity exchange, it does lead to an accumulation or expansion of valuables by individual participants. Morris (1986) argues that in state societies such as ancient Greece, gift exchange was a primary form of exchange within and between communities. Based on ethnographic findings reported in their edited

volume on money, Parry and Bloch propose a new approach to the difference between gift and commodity. According to this view, most societies have two related but separate transactional orders: one concerned with the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order, and another with short-term transactions associated with individual competition (Parry and Bloch 1989: 24). More recent work develops this line of argument by stressing the mutual imbrication of gift and commodity forms and the need to analyze them together, for instance in debates on sustainability and moral economies (Hobbis, 2021; Zhang, 2022).

Several anthropologists have appropriately argued that gifts and commodities can co-exist in certain circumstances (Carrier, 1991; Godelier, 1977; Morris, 1986; Parry and Bloch, 1989). The interchangeability of gift and commodity is also argued to some extent, particularly in relation to the dual role of money as both gift and commodity (Gregory 1980; Strathern 1979), and the transformation of a commodity into a gift through the work of appropriation. However, previous research has tended to distinguish gift economies from commodity economies as separate entities, with less attention paid to situations where the two intersect. Regardless of whether they are viewed as two extremes of a binary relationship, anthropologists tend to differentiate gifts from commodities by highlighting the interpersonal dependence involved in gift exchange. The giver of a gift remains connected to the good or service and does not estrange themselves from it. A gift implies an intention to establish or maintain a social relationship between the parties involved in the exchange. On the other hand, commodities are exchanged solely in relation to other commodities, without any implicit residual obligations or relationships between the individuals involved (Gregory, 1982). In contemporary digital and platform-based environments, this permeability between gift and commodity becomes especially salient, as virtual items may circulate simultaneously as purchasable commodities and as gifts that carry socio-symbolic obligations, anticipating the hybrid virtual economies examined later in this thesis (Taylor, 2024; Yan, 2020).

3.4. Gift in consumer research

In the consumer literature, gift giving has traditionally been viewed as an aggregate of dyadic gift exchange rituals. A number of consumer behavior researchers have studied gift giving. Earlier research focused on differentiating between purchasing for personal use and gift giving (Belk, 1982; Heeler et al., 1980; Scammon et al., 1982). Belk (1979) identified four functions of gift giving: marking important life events, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, creating a medium of economic exchange, and socializing children into societal customs. Sherry (1983) proposed that gift giving has social, economic, and personal dimensions and developed a typology based on the nature of the gift, the donor-recipient relationship, and situational conditions, such as holidays. Sherry's (1983) processual model of gift giving served as a conceptual foundation for subsequent consumer studies on gift giving (e.g., Belk and Coon, 1993; Fischer and Arnold, 1990; Joy, 2001; Lowrey et al., 2004; Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim, 1993; Ruth et al., 1999; Sherry and McGrath, 1989). More recent consumer work continues to build on this processual view, but locates gifts within broader consumption systems in which gifting simultaneously performs identity work, mediates market relationships and enacts forms of mediated intimacy (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024).

Sherry (1983) posits two distinct motives for gift giving: altruistic and agonistic. Altruistic motives are characterized by the donor's desire to maximize the pleasure of the recipient, while agonistic motives prioritize the donor's personal satisfaction. Both motives can be present in a single gift-giving event, representing opposite ends of a spectrum. Gifts also serve as a means of communicating the giver's perception of the receiver, as illustrated by a parent giving a gender-specific toy to reinforce gender stereotypes or a friend giving an intimate gift to signal an intention to deepen their relationship. Belk (1976) builds on Mauss' (1956) seminal work on primitive societies, emphasizing the obligation felt by a giver not only to give but also to receive and repay. Interestingly, Belk implies that the tension created by accepting a gift can be mitigated

by offering a gift in return, thereby avoiding having to reciprocate through other means such as granting favors. Obligation and reciprocity are central to the gift-giving process and have been extensively studied (e.g. D'Souza, 2003; Joy, 2001; Schütte & Ciarlante, 1998). Obligation can be the primary reason for gift giving, as in the case of giving a Valentine's Day gift to one's partner (Rugimbana et al., 2002). The obligation to give is matched by the obligation to reciprocate, unless the act of gift giving is an expression of agapic love (Belk & Coon, 1993). These themes of obligation, symbolic communication and mixed motives are now also traced in digitally mediated and parasocial relationships, where gifts articulate identity claims and relationship intentions between viewers and content creators or streamers (Liu et al., 2025; Zhang & Liu, 2024).

According to Sherry, gift giving is a continuous cycle of reciprocities, and the gift exchange process is a dialectical chain of gift and token gift transactions between two partners, involving three stages: gestation, prestation, and reformulation. The gestation stage of gift giving refers to the behavior and actions that precede the exchange, such as the donor's motivation, search for, and acquisition of the gift. Much of the existing consumer research on gift giving is focused on this stage. For example, Sherry and McGrath (1989) examined shopping behavior and gift selection during the Christmas/Hanukkah season in two Midwestern American gift stores, while Fischer and Arnold (1990) investigated the role of gender in Christmas gift shopping. Otnes et al. (1993) developed a model of gift selection behavior for easy and difficult recipients. The prestation stage is the actual gift exchange and includes the recipient's response and the donor's evaluation of that response. Examples of studies that focus on this stage include Joy's (2001) examination of the continuum of social ties that bind gift givers and recipients in Hong Kong, and Belk and Coon's (1993) investigation of agapic or "unselfish" gift giving among lovers. The reformulation stage involves the disposition of the gift, such as its consumption, display, storage, or exchange, and may involve its rejection. Gift reciprocation can result in a realignment of the gifting relationship and a

reversal of roles between exchange partners. Studies that explore this stage include Ruth et al.'s (1999) investigation of the influence of recipient perception on relationship alignment, and Lowrey et al.'s (2004) presentation of a taxonomy of ten social factors that influence donors' gift behaviors and motivations over time.

Despite Sherry's model being a significant influence on consumer research, its effectiveness is limited due to an oversimplified, atomistic, and economicistic view of gift giving and the associated sociocultural dynamics. The model's emphasis on social ties through direct or indirect recompense reflects strong exchange theoretical undertones (Cheal, 1988). However, subsequent consumer studies have exclusively viewed gift giving as a process of balanced reciprocal exchange, a critique raised by Belk and Coon (1993). Giesler (2006) argues that consumer gift giving cannot be solely conceptualized as an aggregate of dyadic gift transactions. He proposes the concept of a consumer gift system, which is a system of social solidarity founded on a structured set of gift exchange and social relationships among consumers. Key features of a consumer gift system include social distinctions, the norm of reciprocity, and rituals and symbolisms. Empirical evidence supports this concept. Studies of live-streaming, social network games and other platformed environments similarly describe viewers' and users' contributions as parts of wider gift systems in which financial, symbolic and relational transfers are tightly interwoven (Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Wohn, Freeman, & McLaughlin, 2018; Wu & Ma, 2017; Alkhawwari, 2024; Kim, Ha, Kim, & Hemphill, 2025; Aljarah et al., 2025). These developments show how classic consumer gift theories travel into digital and hybrid economies, providing an important bridge to later sections on online and virtual gifting.

3.5. The “dark side of gift”

Gift-giving is widely perceived as a positive social practice that fosters relationships, expresses care, and strengthens social bonds. However, beneath this seemingly benevolent act lies a darker side that has been the subject of growing academic interest. From obligations and power dynamics to emotional tolls and cultural conflicts, the act

of giving and receiving gifts can carry unintended negative consequences. In this sense, the “dark side” does not negate the category of the gift itself, but reveals how the same practices that bind people together can also constrain, burden, or harm them.

The seminal work of Marcel Mauss (1925) provides the foundation for understanding the darker aspects of gift-giving. Mauss argued that gifts are never truly “free”; they create obligations to reciprocate, binding individuals and groups in cycles of giving, receiving, and returning. While Mauss emphasized the social cohesion fostered by such exchanges, later scholars highlighted the potential for exploitation and coercion embedded in these practices. Bourdieu (1990) expanded on this idea, introducing the concept of symbolic violence, where gifts serve as tools of domination. He argued that gifting is often a means of asserting social power, subtly subordinating recipients by creating debts that are difficult to repay. Similarly, Weiner (1992) explored how inalienable possessions, given as gifts, impose obligations that reinforce hierarchical relationships. These theories reveal that gift-giving is not always an act of goodwill but a practice fraught with social and psychological complexities. The dark side of gifting emerges when these obligations are manipulated to serve the interests of the giver, creating imbalance and tension in relationships. In such cases, reciprocity remains formally in place, but the moral meaning of the exchange shifts towards strategic advantage and latent coercion.

One of the most pervasive themes in the dark side of gift literature is the burden of obligation. Gifts often create expectations of reciprocity, which can be emotionally and financially taxing for recipients. Sherry (1983) noted that this burden is particularly acute when recipients lack the means or desire to reciprocate. In consumer contexts, gifts that are overly extravagant or inappropriate can amplify this sense of obligation, leading to feelings of guilt or resentment (Ruth et al., 1999). The problem of unwanted gifts further exacerbates this dynamic. Recipients may feel trapped by gifts they cannot use or do not value, yet rejecting or regifting these items often carries social stigma. These tensions highlight the potential for gifts to create discomfort rather than joy,

challenging the notion that gifting is inherently positive. Recent work on digitally mediated gifting similarly shows how viewers and users may experience pressure to keep up with escalating gift norms or spending levels in order to sustain recognition and belonging (Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Alkhawwari, 2024; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024).

Gifts are frequently used as tools of power and manipulation, reinforcing inequalities and asserting dominance. In asymmetrical relationships, gifts can serve to highlight the giver's superior status or create long-term dependencies. Yan (1996) observed that in traditional Chinese culture, gifts often functioned within guanxi networks, establishing hierarchical relationships and fostering reciprocal obligations that were difficult to escape. In personal relationships, gifts are sometimes wielded as instruments of control. Caplow (1984) described how gift-giving rituals, such as holiday exchanges, often reinforce traditional gender roles and familial hierarchies. Similarly, Ward and Broniarczyk (2011) found that strategic gifting in intimate relationships can lead to identity threats, where recipients feel their autonomy or self-concept is undermined by the giver's intentions. These insights have been extended to contemporary consumer and media environments, where strategic gifting can be used to manage impressions, secure influence, or silence dissent within brands' fan communities and online groups (Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Zhang & Liu, 2024).

The dark side of gifting also manifests in conflicts and exploitative practices. Gifts that are perceived as inappropriate, excessive, or insincere can create tension between givers and recipients, leading to disputes or estrangement (Belk & Coon, 1993). In professional settings, corporate gifting often blurs the line between generosity and bribery, raising ethical concerns about favoritism and corruption (Steidlmeier, 1999). In digital environments, gifting systems are increasingly susceptible to exploitation. Wohn and Freeman (2020) highlighted how virtual gifting on platforms like Twitch and TikTok can create financial strain for users seeking social recognition. Similarly, Consalvo (2009) described how gifting systems in online games are often manipulated

for personal gain, undermining trust within gaming communities. Studies of live-streaming and social media platforms further show how design features such as leaderboards, time-limited campaigns and ranked gift lists can intensify competition, envy and exclusion, reinforcing the ambivalence of digital gifts as both social currencies and potential vectors of harm (Wohn et al., 2018; Wu & Ma, 2017; Kim et al., 2025).

The dark side of gift-giving raises significant ethical questions, particularly in professional and digital contexts. Corporate gifting practices, for example, often walk a fine line between fostering goodwill and coercing loyalty. Steidlmeier (1999) argued that such practices can compromise ethical decision-making, particularly in industries where transparency and impartiality are critical. In digital spaces, the commodification of gifting systems introduces additional ethical dilemmas. Platforms that monetize gifting often exploit users' psychological vulnerabilities, encouraging excessive spending through gamified mechanics (Taylor, 2018). These practices challenge the authenticity of gifting, transforming a social ritual into a transactional activity driven by profit motives. They also point to a broader tension between gifts as voluntary, relational acts and gifts as engineered revenue streams within platform business models.

While gift-giving is often celebrated as a positive and meaningful practice, its darker dimensions reveal significant social, emotional, and ethical challenges. From perpetuating power imbalances to inducing guilt and conflict, the complexities of gifting call for critical reflection, particularly in emerging contexts like virtual worlds. By understanding and addressing the dark side of gifting, we can foster more equitable and inclusive practices that preserve the benefits of this time-honored tradition while minimizing its negative impacts. At the same time, existing "dark side" discussions largely remain within scenarios where the outward form of the gift is maintained and harm occurs through obligation, pressure or symbolic violence. Much less is known about situations in which the logic of gifting is pushed further towards openly adversarial or predatory practices, an issue that will be developed later in this chapter

when discussing more radically inverted forms of exchange.

3.6. Gift exchange in online context

In the era of the Internet, social networking and content sharing have experienced a resurgence, particularly with the growing emphasis on user-generated and user-contributed content in various types of online platforms, including wikis, media-sharing services, blogs, and social networking sites (Skågeby, 2010). More recent research on livestreaming, creator economies, and social network games shows that these environments increasingly organize interaction around gift-like transfers of virtual items, tips, and platform-specific currencies (Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Kim et al., 2025). However, the introduction of digital technologies has added unique social and technical characteristics that impact mediated social behavior. In this section, we will review several research directions to explore the development of gift-giving practices in online contexts. Utilizing virtual objects as a medium, online gift-giving has become a primary social activity for building social networks in the digital realm, particularly on platforms where virtual items function as visible tokens of attention, support, and social status (Zhang, 2022; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

3.6.1. Extended Self in digital consumption

The linkages between consumers and their virtual possessions are important to virtual gift research, and recent work on virtual gifting and digital possessions suggests that these attachments are central to how users experience recognition, belonging, and obligation in online environments (Zhang, 2022; Alkhawwari, 2024; Liu et al., 2025). The strength of attachment between consumers and the nonmaterial goods in a digital context may shape their experience towards gain and loss. In his original article of “Extended Self”, Belk (1988, p.140) posited that “knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves.” Rapid development of digital technologies has provided new ways of self-extension.

First aspect is the avatars. Avatars are the representations of consumers (Yee 2006).

They substantially change the ways in which consumers assert and perceive others' identities (Belk 2013; Cool 2012). In virtual worlds, more than placed into an alternate avatar body, consumers have choice in personalizing the representations of different senses of self (Bryant and Akerman 2009; Kamel 2009). It is common for consumers to create avatars in their own image (Belk 2013; Kafai, Fields, and Cook 2010; Meadows 2008; Schultze 2010) and mirror their sense of self in virtual environment, which indicate a transformation from real world into virtual world (Yee 2013). Consumers can become attached to their avatars and this attachment influences not only their self-beliefs and behaviors online but also offline (Bryant and Akerman 2009; Fox, Bailenson and Tricase 2013; Wang, Zhao, and Bamossy 2009; Yee and Bailenson 2007). This may be especially the case for avid players who utilize virtual goods to enhance the performance of their avatars, and recent MMORPG and online gaming studies further show that avatar work is tightly linked to cooperation, prosocial behaviour and reciprocity within groups (Bisberg et al., 2023; Kim S. S. Y. et al., 2022; Pang et al., 2025).

Another means of self-extension in the digital world is through digital possessions. Digital possessions may form a part of the extended self in the same way of the material possessions. Consumers can become attached to these immaterial possessions that are permanently owned by them such as digital photos and digital music as they can to material possessions, and consumers can gain status and an enhanced sense of self from virtual possessions (Belk 1988). However, unlike digital music and digital photos, consumers in the context of online gaming acquire virtual goods in games in which they create and decorate their avatars, like the Sims (Frasca 2001), Gran Turismo (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007, 2013), Habbo Hotel (Lehdonvirta, Wilska, and Johnson 2009; Martin 2008) and/or accumulate virtual goods to compete for special titles and equipment (e.g., magical swords, armor, weapons etc.) like *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest*, *Maria* (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010; Mauco 2009). Players engage in online activities to gain status (Wang, Zhao, and Bamossy 2009), solve problems

(Lehdonvirta 2010), express identity (Bryant and Akerman 2009), and mark and increase attractiveness of group identity (Martin 2008). All the display of these acquisitions act as an expression of self, just as it does in offline worlds (Belk 2013; Bryant and Akerman 2009; Martin 2008). While virtual goods lack material substance (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010), they are argued to be no less real or able to satisfy desires than material goods, and they can be very real to their possessors (Lehdonvirta 2012), with recent survey and interview studies similarly showing that ownership of rare or personalized virtual items is closely tied to status-display, social connection, and willingness to support favoured others through digital gifts (Zhang & Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Aljarah et al., 2025).

Belk (2014) also suggests the virtual possessions are not as much a part of self as tangible possessions, and there are fewer effective means of self-display than tangible goods because they are only visible to other players in the gaming world (Belk 2014). However, such anthropocentric perspective ignores the agency of object (Belk 2017) and falls short in explaining why consumers avidly invest time and money on acquiring virtual goods in online gaming. The level of consumers' engagement in the online gaming world may suggest that humans could be viewed as extended objects of the avatars within a flat ontology between the players and their avatars (Bogost 2012). The gaming scripts prescribe players to follow certain norms in their efforts of acquiring virtual possessions for the avatar. Human labor is transformed into digital display of avatars in the virtual world. Players control avatars as much as being controlled and affected by their avatars. Consumers learn to interpret the behaviors of not only their own avatars but also other avatars within the game, and recent studies of interaction with agents and avatars highlight how such engagements can generate emotional attachment, empathy and a sense of social presence even when counterparts are non-human (Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Aydin et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2025). Besides, the avatars do have effect on consumers sense of self, but it doesn't mean the abandon of physical bodies and tangible possessions. The nature of prosthetic

possessions is most often to enhance what our inseparable bodies and minds can do rather than to replace them (Belk 2014). Virtual possessions could act as the role of physical body and tangible possessions, and the attachment between virtual possessions and consumers could be as strong as that to material possessions.

Belk's (2013) research highlights that even when virtual items are used as gifts, it still requires time, thoughtfulness, and effort to give, despite the lack of physical material loss or cost. As Boellstorff (2008) notes, digital gift-giving creates value and emphasizes the social significance of digital objects. This form of gift-giving can also help to foster friendships and community bonds, and can provide a collective sense of identity and extended self, as Vold et al. (2006) argue. Despite lacking physical presence, the intangibility of such gifts may not diminish their ability to contribute to a sense of collective self. Gifts that require money or effort are also common in virtual environments, such as Second Life. For example, Martin's (2008) research highlights that in Second Life, individuals may give gifts of fashionable clothing to help newbies shed their standard appearance and facilitate their acceptance into online communities, as noted by Benwell and Stokoe (2006). Analyses of digital gift-giving have identified a range of motivations, including reciprocity-seeking, ingratiation, status-seeking, altruism, and love, as noted by Coyne (2005), Denegri Knott et al. (2012), Lampel and Bhalla (2007), and Martin (2008). The motivations behind digital gift-giving are complex and multifaceted, and further research is needed to explore the various factors that influence this phenomenon. Recent studies of livestreaming and social gifting ecosystems confirm and extend these patterns, showing how parasocial relationships, social isolation and platform visibility incentives shape why users send virtual gifts (Zhang & Liu, 2024; Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Aljarah et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2025). The motivations behind digital gift-giving are complex and multifaceted, and further research is needed to explore the various factors that influence this phenomenon, particularly in persistent game worlds such as MMORPGs where virtual possessions and gifts circulate within long-term social relationships rather than

short, session-based encounters.

3.6.2. Gift exchange in online society

Gifting is a central concept in both the analysis and practical building of social networks and communities (Berking, 1999). With the growing use of mediating technologies to give, share, and circulate digital content in social networks, livestreaming sites, and game platforms, gift exchange has been given new dimensions and characteristics in online circumstances, where virtual objects and attention function as central relationship-building resources (Giesler, 2006; Skågeby, 2010; Zhang, 2022; Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024).

Firstly, in online contexts, virtual gifts themselves are often treated as replicable items with only a slight degree of scarcity within a free-market economy (Barbrook, 1998; Bays & Mowbray, 1999). Its use value is often emphasized, while its form of “free” giving is viewed as deceptive. However, we have demonstrated above that several streams of research believe that intangible objects are no less functional than physical objects, and virtual objects are often perceived by consumers as highly personal property, with virtual gifts and in-app items acting as socially meaningful possessions rather than trivial “pixels” (Lehdonvirta, 2012; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Alkhawwari, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). In line with this perspective, the bonding value of virtual gifts should be given more attention. Media-sharing is becoming increasingly common and social. Social networking services are increasingly emphasizing the nature of relationships between participants. Any attempt at quantification may be counterintuitive. Pricing a social relationship may be destructive to the relationship itself. Therefore, when objects and attention are transferred together, any quantifiable measure may overlook the central focus, intention, and value.

Secondly, reciprocity in online gift-giving follows a more distributed pattern than what traditional theory suggests, where general reciprocity occurs mostly in close relationships (Sahlins, 1972; Offer, 1997). In social media sharing and digital gifting, reciprocal patterns often appear reversed, with generalized reciprocity occurring

frequently with strangers or weak ties, and more calculated, status-oriented exchanges emerging in closer or more enduring relationships (Giesler, 2006; Skågeby, 2010; Benkler, 2006; Freling et al., 2024). Mediated sociability seems to be more roaming, global, and open to multiplicity in relationships. One interpretation of this is that media objects are often shared more openly, but when connected to social metadata, visibility metrics, and recommender logics, privacy concerns arise and the receiving relationships become closer, more selective, or strategically curated (Cenite et al., 2009; Wohn et al., 2018; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024). Another interpretation is that mediated social networks make it easier for users to segment their sociability and distribute it where it fits best. Additionally, many sharing acts are invested in physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, or economically, without certainty in generating returns, which arguably turns them into gifts under the perspective of generalized reciprocity. This raises the issue of “setting” in technology-mediated gifting, where users may find it difficult to calculate expected returns in neoclassical terms and instead act based on a “sharing spirit” or a norm of generalized or hybrid reciprocity, combining altruistic motives with expectations of recognition, visibility, or platform-specific rewards (Giesler, 2006; Cenite et al., 2009; Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Freling et al., 2024). The inherent uncertainty of a return also affects socially reinforced values, such as reputation, and is likely to impact the patterns of transfers.

Thirdly, virtual consumer communities rely on the free exchange of information and advice between members as a crucial element in creating and maintaining these communities (Giesler, 2006; Kollock, 1999; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Altruism, reciprocity, and reputation-seeking have been identified as the main motivating factors for such gift-giving practices. In stranger-based social networks and livestreaming environments, status and status-seeking also play a significant role in sustaining gift-giving and content contributions, as users deploy gifts and shared objects to signal taste, commitment, or loyalty to specific communities and creators (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Liu et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2025). Since status-seeking online

cannot be achieved through direct display or asserting rank, it takes a different form of identity enactment. The gift's message about the giver contains the identity that the giver wants to establish as a way of demonstrating status. The persuasiveness of this message as a way of seeking status does not depend on direct interaction with the receiver of the information, which is why this process can sustain gift-giving. However, as in traditional communities, purely reflexive status-seeking can trigger reinforcing forces that make status-seeking through gift-giving more pervasive.

In sum, the literature on gift-giving in the online context highlights the importance of sociability, reciprocity, reputation-seeking, and status in sustaining gift-giving practices in virtual communities. The nature of online gift-giving differs from traditional forms of gift-giving in terms of its anonymity, openness, and distribution across different types of relationships. Much of this work has examined social media, file-sharing communities, and livestreaming platforms, where gifts circulate in relatively short-lived sessions and visibility metrics are highly salient. By contrast, the present thesis focuses on persistent virtual worlds in MMORPGs, where virtual gifts are embedded in long-term collaboration, conflict, and community life, and where gifting practices interact with game mechanics, avatars and non-human entities in ways that extend and complicate existing accounts of online gift exchange.

3.7. Theoretical background

3.7.1. Object agency and non-anthropocentric ontology

Recent turn to object-oriented ontology has emphasized the agency of objects in affecting other objects and consumers (e.g., Bogost 2012; Hoffman and Novak 2018; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Latour 2005) and it provides the needed framework to understand relationships between avatar and digital possession, and this assemblage's influence on consumers. In the context of virtual worlds and online games, this perspective draws attention to how avatars, game items, non-player characters and other computer-generated entities participate in shaping practice rather than serving as passive containers of human intention (Lehdonvirta, 2012; Hoffman & Novak, 2018;

Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022). The object-oriented ontology enables us to understand objects from the perspective of objects. It argues that rather than something passively invested with meaning by consumers (Belk 1988), objects express roles through their interactions with consumers. An object may have the capacity to affect and be affected by other entities (Agency; Franklin and Graesser 1996), to function independently (Autonomy; Parasuraman, Sheridan and Wickens 2000) and to control other entities and make its own decisions (Authority; Hansen, Pigozzi and van der Torre 2007). An object's properties of agency, autonomy, and authority determine its specific capacities to interact, communicate and decide. Though consumers cannot directly understand their expressions and experiences, an indirect understanding may be formed through object anthropomorphism.

Hoffman and Novak (2018a) focus on the relationship between consumers and smart objects, that have the three capacities, agency, autonomy and authority. Drawing on assemblage theory, they elaborate the relationships through different kinds of consumer-object and object-object interactions. The concept of smart objects and object-oriented ontology may help us understand the objects' three capacities and their effects on relationship between other objects and consumers. This work is particularly relevant for digital environments in which software agents, recommendation systems, avatars and in-game objects make decisions, filter information and trigger events that condition how users can act and how value circulates.

As discussed above, the degree to which an object is smart corresponds to the extent of its capacity to exercise agency, autonomy and authority. These capacities may be exercised through interaction with other entities (DeLanda 2011). Consumers and objects can have experience and are able to express agentic roles. Smart objects' capacities to affect other entities and be affected by them render them capable of basic experience and some of them could even have the capacities for flittering and processing the awareness experiences. Basic experience is the lowest, most fundamental level of experience of an entity (Chalmers 1995), which is the fundamental

outcomes of exercises and involve not only human but also nonhuman entities. And the higher level of experience, awareness experience, refers to the experiences that deal with the reaction to easy problems. Recent studies of interaction with virtual agents and avatars show how such non-human entities can elicit social presence, empathy and behavioural adaptation from users, providing empirical support for the claim that they exercise a form of practical agency within digital networks (Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Aydin et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2025).

To understand these experience as well as the roles they express, Hoffman and Novak (2018b) propose two distinct anthropomorphic mechanisms: human-centric anthropomorphism and object-oriented anthropomorphism. The former refers to “a process of inductive inference whereby people attribute to nonhumans distinctively human characteristics, particularly the agency and experience” (Waytz, Heafner, and Epley 2014, p. 113), while the latter use metaphors to understand the object from the perspective of an object. Hoffman and Novak (2018b) indicate the object-oriented anthropomorphism as an alternative to human-centric anthropomorphism and regard it as a meaningful way of understanding object experiences since they have their own ontology to be independent from consumers. Anthropomorphic metaphors can be put into service to understand the object’s actual experience, rather than to project an element of humanness onto the object (Bogost 2012, p.65). Understanding an object from the angle of object could help understand what the object may be expressing during interaction.

In sum, object-oriented ontology enables us to examine the object relationships from the perspective of the capacities of agency, autonomy and authority and their effects on other objects and consumers. Building on this work, the present study approaches virtual possessions, avatars, and other computer-generated entities as potentially agentic participants in online gift systems, asking how their capacities to act, constrain and respond shape gifting practices and experiences in MMORPGs. This non-anthropocentric stance also prepares the ground for the subsequent use of Actor-

Network Theory, where human and non-human actors are treated symmetrically within wider networks of exchange and reciprocity.

3.7.2. Actor Network Theory: A theoretical lens on non-human entities

Given the digital context and the involvement of computer-generated entities (CGEs) in this study, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers a highly suitable theoretical framework for analyzing how gifting practices are configured in and through heterogeneous networks of humans and non-humans. ANT has become a pivotal lens for examining the intricate interplay between human and non-human actors within complex networks. Developed by Callon (1999), Latour (2007), and Law (2008), ANT diverges from traditional sociological theories by attributing agency not only to humans but also to non-human entities such as technologies, objects, and algorithms. Recent work applying ANT to digital platforms, virtual environments, and algorithmically mediated systems further demonstrates how software agents, interfaces, and data structures participate in structuring social practices and value flows (Goggin, 2011; Hoffman & Novak, 2018; Hu et al., 2025). By emphasizing the distributed nature of agency, ANT challenges conventional paradigms and redefines how agency operates within networks, positioning society as co-constructed by the dynamic relationships among its constituents.

This perspective sees every actor, whether human, technological, or material, as an active participant contributing to shaping outcomes. ANT's emphasis on the co-construction of society makes it an especially relevant framework for studying virtual worlds, where the boundaries between human and non-human actors blur. In persistent game worlds like MMORPGs, avatars, non-player characters (NPCs), game items, interfaces and back-end algorithms all enter into chains of action that enable, constrain, and translate players' intentions, including when they give, receive, or withhold virtual gifts. At the heart of ANT lies the notion that agency is not exclusive to humans but is instead distributed among all entities involved in a network. This perspective fundamentally redefines how interactions and relationships are analyzed. Several core

principles form the foundation of ANT.

At the conceptual level, ANT highlights distributed agency, emphasizing that all entities in a network possess the capacity to influence its configuration (Latour, 2005). This view is particularly relevant in virtual worlds, where digital objects such as avatars, in-game items, gifting interfaces, and recommendation systems actively shape social interactions, reward structures, and player experiences (Lehdonvirta, 2010; Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Aydin et al., 2023). ANT also rests on a relational ontology, which holds that the meaning and function of an actor emerge from its position and connections within the network; for instance, a rare virtual item in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) derives its value not inherently but through its interactions with players, game mechanics, and the broader virtual economy, underscoring the fluid and contingent nature of networks. A further core notion is translation, the process through which actors negotiate, enrol, and redefine one another's roles in a network (Callon, 1986). In digital environments, translation explains how virtual objects or systems mediate relationships and align or reconfigure the interests of diverse actors; for example, a gifting system in an MMORPG translates social norms of reciprocity and solidarity into specific rules, affordances, and rewards, influencing how players interact, cooperate, and exchange items over time (Giesler, 2006; Wohn & Freeman, 2020). In addition, ANT adopts a symmetrical perspective, treating human and non-human actors with equal analytical importance, which allows researchers to explore how non-human entities such as algorithms, interfaces, or virtual environments actively shape social dynamics rather than merely facilitating human actions.

The principles of ANT have been applied to a variety of contexts in virtual worlds, shedding light on the roles of human and non-human actors in shaping social interactions and economic systems. In virtual environments, digital objects such as avatars, in-game currencies, and rare collectibles function as active participants. These objects mediate relationships, influence behaviors, and contribute to the construction of

social networks. Lehdonvirta (2010) argues that virtual goods possess both functional and symbolic value, shaping not only gameplay but also the social hierarchies within gaming communities. Similarly, Goggin (2011) highlights how digital objects act as boundary objects, bridging individual experiences and collective practices within digital networks. Avatars, in particular, exemplify the active role of non-human entities in digital worlds. Taylor (2009) notes that avatars are not merely representations of players but are imbued with agency through their interactions with other actors in the network. Recent studies further show that interactions with avatars and virtual agents can elicit social presence, empathy and behavioural adjustment from users, suggesting that these digital entities participate meaningfully in the co-construction of relationships and obligations (Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Hu et al., 2025). Through customization, gameplay, and social interactions, avatars co-construct identities and relationships within virtual worlds. The latest development involves gifting directed toward non-human entities, such as avatars or intelligent systems, where players “give” items or resources to entities that do not possess human consciousness but still occupy central positions in networks of value and recognition. This shift challenges traditional notions of reciprocity, as gifts to non-human entities often lack expectations of human-like reciprocation. Boellstorff (2015) highlights how the agency of virtual objects and avatars reconfigures social networks, enabling players to form relationships that transcend human interactions.

While ANT has been widely applied across disciplines, its use in the context of virtual worlds reveals both its strengths and limitations. A key contribution of ANT lies in its emphasis on non-human agency, which allows researchers to move beyond anthropocentric frameworks and consider the active role of technologies and objects in shaping social dynamics. For instance, digital gifting systems are not merely tools for exchange but act as mediators that influence player behaviours, expectations, and patterns of reciprocity. At the same time, applying ANT to virtual worlds poses substantial challenges. The theory has been criticized for its methodological complexity:

mapping relationships within a network can be overwhelming. Virtual worlds are characterized by their fluidity, where actor roles and relationships shift rapidly, complicating empirical analysis and representation. In addition, ANT has been faulted for paying limited attention to issues of power, inequality, and conflict, which are central to understanding dark or malicious forms of reciprocity; this limitation is particularly salient for the present study, which examines not only cooperative gifting but also anti-gift practices in MMORPGs.

Game items in online games therefore exert their agency primarily through object-object interactions with avatars. As these interactions extend into subsequent consumer-object relationships, they attach value to players and help them gain status and prestige (Wang, Zhao, and Bamossy 2009), articulate identity (Bryant and Akerman 2009), and increase their attractiveness to others (Belk 2013). Although such items are only temporarily owned and indirectly carried by consumers, players still invest significant time and resources to acquire and accumulate these virtual goods as part of building their avatars. Within MMORPG gifting networks, the same objects circulate as gifts, balanced returns, or targets of anti-gift, so their object agency also mediates how generosity, obligation, and hostile taking are materialised and remembered within the ANT-style configurations of human and non-human actants discussed in this thesis.

3.8. Theoretical gaps of recent literature

The study of gifting in digital contexts, particularly online gaming, presents an evolving frontier for research. While existing literature has contributed significantly to understanding reciprocity, social networks, and the complexities of gift exchange, several critical gaps remain. Recent work on virtual gifting in livestreaming, social media, and mobile platforms has deepened understanding of digital gifts as tools for visibility, status, and parasocial interaction (e.g. Zhang, 2022; Woh & Freeman, 2020; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Liu et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024), yet these studies mostly focus on short-session or content-centric environments rather than persistent virtual worlds

such as MMORPGs. These gaps pertain to the unique dynamics of digital gifts in gaming, the role of computer-generated entities in redefining gift giving, and the emergence of further dark gift practices, especially in long-term, socially dense online worlds. This section examines these areas in depth and identifies theoretical gaps that the present research on MMORPG gifting and anti-gift practices seeks to address.

3.8.1. Gift in digital context

Digital gifts have transformed the traditional concept of gifting, emphasizing their intangibility, role in building social networks, and hybrid nature of reciprocity. Despite substantial advancements in understanding these dynamics, several gaps in the literature persist.

Intangibility

Traditional theories of gifting inadequately account for the implications of intangibility in digital gifts. Traditional gift exchange theories, such as Mauss's (1925) concept of reciprocity and Belk's (1979) exploration of material possessions, emphasize the role of tangible gifts in fostering emotional and cultural connections. However, these frameworks inadequately address how intangibility shapes the dynamics of digital gifting. Digital gifts differ fundamentally from traditional, tangible gifts due to their immaterial nature. Virtual items, avatars, and currencies lack physical presence, which affects their emotional and symbolic resonance. While some studies highlight the functional value of digital gifts in games and livestreaming environments, which show how they can purchase visibility, signal support, or unlock in-app privileges (Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Liu et al., 2025), their ability to carry lasting sentimental or relational value, especially in persistent virtual worlds, remains underexplored.

More recent research on virtual possessions and digital gifts suggests that intangibility does not necessarily weaken attachment: users can develop strong emotional bonds with immaterial goods that are tightly linked to identity expression, group belonging, or parasocial ties (Alkhawwari, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Aljarah et

al., 2025). However, this work has primarily examined platform-based gifting and social media contexts rather than MMORPGs, where virtual gifts circulate within long-term narratives, guild structures, and collaborative play. We still know relatively little about how the intangible nature of gifts interacts with the specific temporalities and social architectures of game worlds, and how this shapes their perceived weight in obligation, gratitude, or conflict.

Kinship vs. Social Network

Traditional gift exchange has historically served as a cornerstone for building and maintaining kinship networks. Gifts within families are symbolic acts that reinforce familial bonds, obligations, and cultural heritage (Yan, 1996). These exchanges are often cyclical, tied to significant life events, and embedded in long-standing social structures that prioritize collective identity and intergenerational continuity. In contrast, digital gifting in online gaming communities emphasizes creating and maintaining broader social networks that transcend familial boundaries. These gifts are often aimed at building connections within a global online community. Studies of online gift-giving and digital communities show that virtual gifts frequently move between strangers or weak ties, where they function as tokens of recognition, inclusion, or interest rather than as carriers of kinship-based obligation (Giesler, 2006; Skågeby, 2010; Zhang, 2022). The divergence between kinship-based and online social networks highlights a fundamental shift in the role of gifting. Kinship gifting is deeply personal and localized, while digital gifts operate on a global scale, fostering connections among individuals who may never meet in person.

Current literature inadequately addresses the transformative impact of digital gifting on the nature of social relationships. While traditional gifts reinforce pre-existing kinship ties, digital gifts prioritize inclusivity and immediacy within expansive online networks. Recent work on livestreaming and platform gifting also points to the emergence of “networked publics” where gifts help constitute audiences and fan communities rather than intimate dyads (Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Liu et al., 2025;

Kim et al., 2025). Further research is needed to explore how digital gifting practices influence the sustainability and depth of social relationships within online communities, as well as their capacity to replicate the emotional and cultural richness of kinship-based exchanges. In persistent game worlds such as MMORPGs, where long-term groups, guilds and factions coexist with ad hoc parties and transient encounters, these questions become even more salient but remain empirically underdeveloped.

Reciprocity

Traditional gifting often operates within frameworks of generalized reciprocity, characterized by altruistic exchanges without explicit expectations of return (Sahlins, 1972). Generalized reciprocity refers to altruistic exchanges without an explicit expectation of immediate or direct return. In digital spaces, this form of reciprocity emerged during the early stages of online communities, where gifting practices fostered a sense of solidarity and collective identity. For instance, Rheingold (1993) noted that online communities like The WELL were built on trust and mutual aid, where members freely shared knowledge and resources without expecting compensation. Digital gifts, such as free software, open-source contributions, and knowledge-sharing on platforms like Wikipedia, exemplify generalized reciprocity. The act of giving in these contexts is motivated by the desire to build communities and contribute to shared goals rather than personal gain (Benkler, 2006). However, the increasing commodification of digital spaces and the rise of monetized platforms have challenged the sustainability of purely altruistic exchanges.

As digital platforms became commercialized, gifting systems evolved to incorporate elements of market logic, leading to hybrid reciprocity. Hybrid reciprocity combines altruistic motives with transactional dynamics, creating complex exchanges where gifting practices are intertwined with economic incentives. Recent conceptual work provides a foundation for analyzing generalized reciprocity and hybrid reciprocity in digital environments, highlighting how giver-recipient mismatches and mixed motives complicate expectations of return (Freling et al., 2024). Their discussion on giver-

recipient mismatches aligns with understanding hybrid reciprocity, where gifts often combine altruistic and transactional elements. Wohn and Freeman (2020) analyzed hybrid reciprocity in social media and gaming platforms, highlighting how virtual gifts are often exchanged with implicit expectations of social or material returns. For example, on platforms like Twitch, users send virtual gifts to streamers not only as tokens of appreciation but also to gain social recognition, exclusive content, or other privileges. This blending of altruism and market-driven motives reflects the dual pressures of maintaining community cohesion while navigating monetized systems. However, it also introduces tensions, as the expectation of reciprocity can lead to exploitation, inequality, or dissatisfaction among participants.

Subsequent empirical studies on digital gifting similarly show that motivations such as status-seeking, loneliness, and desire for attention interact with platform incentives and ranking mechanisms to produce complex reciprocity patterns that are neither purely generalized nor purely transactional (Zhang & Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Aljarah et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). While the concept of hybrid reciprocity has been explored in digital environments, its application to virtual world contexts remains underdeveloped. Existing studies highlight the blending of social bonding and economic incentives in virtual gifting systems but fail to capture the complexity of player motivations and the role of game mechanics in shaping these interactions. Besides, the development and transformation of reciprocity in virtual worlds remain poorly understood. While traditional frameworks provide insights into generalized and balanced reciprocity, the specific pathways through which reciprocity emerges and evolves in digital gaming environments are unclear. For instance, how players transition from generalized altruism to hybrid reciprocity, or how platform design influences this process, is insufficiently addressed. In MMORPGs, where players repeatedly meet, cooperate, compete and remember each other across time, reciprocity may shift dynamically between generalized, balanced, hybrid and even more antagonistic forms, yet this fluidity has rarely been examined. Further work is need to

examine how gifting behaviors evolve under the dual pressures of altruism and transactional gameplay, particularly in relation to platform design and player expectations.

3.8.2. From social beings to digital entities

The traditional frameworks of gift exchange have predominantly centred on human-to-human interactions, focusing on reciprocity, relational dynamics, and the social constructs of giving. However, the rising prominence of computer-generated entities (CGEs) in digital environments introduces complexities that challenge these anthropocentric theories. Recent work on avatars, virtual agents and smart objects shows that non-human entities can evoke social presence, guide behaviour and structure interaction in ways that resemble human partners (Hoffman & Novak, 2018; Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Aydin et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2025), yet this literature rarely addresses gift exchange explicitly. Object-oriented ontology and Actor-Network Theory offer promising lenses for interpreting these dynamics, but their application to gifting remains significantly underdeveloped. This shift from purely human recipients to mixed constellations of humans and CGEs necessitates a re-examination of the foundational assumptions underpinning gift exchange, underscoring theoretical gaps that require further scholarly attention.

Traditional theories of gift exchange (e.g., Mauss, 1925; Sahlins, 1972) are built upon the premise that recipients are human. Gifts are understood to maintain social bonds, generate obligations, and reinforce mutual recognition. In digital environments, however, avatars or NPCs are often the immediate “recipients” or targets of gifts, as players equip, decorate or provision them with virtual items. These entities lack human consciousness, which fundamentally alters the dynamics of reciprocity, even when players respond to them as if they were socially present. Despite their growing relevance, the literature has rarely examined how gifting to non-human entities redefines the act of giving or the structure of obligation. Research is needed to explore

whether CGEs act primarily as tools for functional utility, as extensions of the giver's identity, or as quasi-partners within digital ecosystems that can appear to invoke or redistribute reciprocity (Belk, 2013; Woh et al., 2018; Alkhawwari, 2024).

Reciprocity has traditionally been conceptualized as a deeply relational process, emphasizing the emotional and social interplay between human givers and recipients. Classical frameworks underline the role of reciprocal exchange in fostering solidarity, mutual obligations, and enduring social bonds. These models assume human agency at the core of the gifting process, where gifts act as tangible or symbolic representations of care, trust, and relational commitment. The emergence of CGEs in digital environments introduces a transformative dimension to reciprocity that challenges these assumptions. Unlike traditional gifting contexts, where human intent and agency guide reciprocal exchanges, digital spaces increasingly involve CGEs as mediators, facilitators, or even nominal recipients of gifts. While devoid of human consciousness, these entities are designed to simulate interactive and responsive behaviours that influence how reciprocity unfolds in virtual contexts and how players perceive acknowledgement, gratitude or reward (Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Hu et al., 2025).

One key difference brought by CGEs is the redefinition of the giver and recipient. Traditional reciprocity frameworks emphasize the relational and emotional significance of the recipient's response, with human acknowledgement playing a central role in the reciprocal process. In digital environments, CGEs occupy roles that blur the line between tools and participants. For instance, players may gift items to their avatars as a form of self-investment or customization, treating the avatar as both an extension of themselves and an independent entity worthy of enhancement (Wohn et al., 2018). Similarly, NPCs can serve as surrogate recipients of gifts, providing scripted gratitude, favour boosts or rewards that mirror human reciprocity.

This shift in the recipient's nature raises fundamental questions about the relational implications of gifting in digital contexts. Gifting to CGEs, which lack emotional depth

or true agency, challenges traditional notions of relational reciprocity by substituting human acknowledgment with programmed responses and system-generated outcomes. Belk (2013) suggests that in digital environments, the act of gifting often becomes more symbolic of identity expression rather than relational exchange, especially when directed toward avatars or NPCs. At the same time, recent studies on virtual possessions and parasocial interaction indicate that players may nonetheless experience these exchanges as meaningful, blurring the distinction between self-gift, signalling to others, and “giving to” a non-human entity (Alkhawwari, 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Another significant difference lies in the role of CGEs and technical infrastructures in shaping reciprocal behaviours. Traditional gift exchanges rely on human intent to initiate and sustain reciprocity, but in digital environments CGEs often mediate and structure gifting interactions together with automated, algorithmically configured game systems and interfaces. These systems can dictate the timing, visibility and incentives for gifting, effectively redistributing agency within the reciprocal process (Latour, 2005; Hoffman & Novak, 2018). Unlike human recipients, whose agency is intrinsic and relational, CGEs operate within a framework of programmed responses and predefined outcomes. Despite this, the literature has yet to explore in detail the active roles of CGEs and these automated systems in shaping gifting networks in virtual worlds, for example, whether they are perceived as collaborators, gatekeepers or merely neutral tools, and how they co-construct the meaning and practice of gifting in persistent MMORPG settings.

Besides, the relational depth of gifting involving CGEs also presents a significant theoretical gap. In human-to-human reciprocity, the emotional and symbolic weight of a gift reinforces social bonds and fosters long-term relationships (Sherry, 1983). However, the involvement of CGEs complicates this relational aspect. Gifting to an avatar may evoke a sense of personal fulfillment or identity expression, but the absence of a conscious recipient raises questions about whether these exchanges can replicate the emotional resonance and relational commitment of traditional reciprocity (Belk &

Coon, 1993). Similarly, gifting to NPCs or algorithmic systems often serves functional or strategic purposes, such as unlocking rewards or progressing in gameplay, rather than building enduring social ties. Most recent work on avatars and virtual agents has focused on embodiment, motivation, and social presence rather than on how gift exchange with or through these entities contributes to longer-term networks of obligation, gratitude, or antagonism (Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Hu et al., 2025). Moreover, the emotional and relational dimensions of gifting to CGEs remain underexplored. Further research is needed to understand how these exchanges influence players' psychological and social well-being. Addressing these gaps requires examining the evolving dynamics of reciprocity in digital ecosystems with explicit attention to how CGEs mediate, facilitate, and reshape gifting interactions in virtual environments, a task that this thesis undertakes in the specific context of MMORPG gifting and anti-gift practices.

3.8.3. A further type beyond “dark side of gift”

The exploration of the “dark side of gift” has provided significant insights into the complexities and unintended consequences of gifting behaviors. Existing research in this area has primarily focused on issues such as obligation, exploitation, emotional ambivalence and mismatched expectations, often in consumer or interpersonal contexts (Sherry, 1983; Belk, 1979; Ruth et al., 1999; Morales, 2005; Freling et al., 2024). In these accounts, gifts still operate within recognizable social relationships, and harm usually appears as an unintended by-product or as a tension within otherwise valued ties. By contrast, the concept of a gift as a deliberate negative act, which resonates with Hyde's (1983) discussion of “anti-gift”, remains underdeveloped and is rarely connected to systematic theories of reciprocity or conflict. The anti-gift can be understood as extending beyond existing “dark gift” frameworks by foregrounding malicious intent, the disruption of social harmony and the strategic weaponization of gift-like acts, such as using the form of help or generosity to produce loss, humiliation or dependency. This perspective raises questions that go beyond negative reciprocity in Sahlins' (1972) sense, since the aim is not only to obtain advantage at the other's

expense but, in many instances, to inflict harm or to unsettle the other party's position and relationships within a wider network. To address this conceptual gap, the present study treats malicious reciprocity as a broader macro-level logic of adversarial exchange and positions anti-gift practices as its micro-level manifestations in concrete situations, an approach that has not been systematically developed in the existing literature. This section therefore highlights the theoretical gaps around malicious reciprocity and anti-gifts by examining what prior research has addressed and what remains unexplored, particularly in digital environments.

Malicious Reciprocity

Traditional reciprocity frameworks emphasize trust, mutual respect, and the strengthening of social bonds (Mauss, 1925). Even within the “dark side” discourse, reciprocity often centers on unintended harm, such as feelings of indebtedness or perceived imbalances (Sherry, 1983; Freling et al., 2024). Sahlins' (1972) notion of negative reciprocity already recognizes exchanges in which actors seek to maximize gain while giving as little as possible, yet these interactions are still framed as transactions where both parties are, at least initially, recognized partners in exchange. By contrast, malicious reciprocity refers to situations in which actors purposefully deploy gift-like gestures, transfers or assistance to injure, trap or destabilize others, turning the normative expectations attached to gifts into instruments of attack. Such practices go beyond simply exploiting an exchange partner and instead seek to transform relationships into arenas of sustained conflict, retaliation and strategic harm, which may unfold over extended temporal cycles. In digital contexts, including competitive environments such as MMORPGs, malicious reciprocity can be expressed through marauding, predatory “help”, exploitative trades or staged generosity that is designed to strip others of resources or expose them to ambush, rather than through straightforward robbery or theft. These actions retain the formal features of gifting and exchange, which distinguishes them analytically from pure robbery and justifies treating them as part of an extended gift–counter-gift field rather than as behaviour

wholly outside exchange. Existing studies fail to explore the full implications of malicious reciprocity, particularly how it may affect social relationships among individuals, as well as its influence on broader social networks. Understanding how and why individuals engage in such practices requires a deeper investigation into the motivations, scripts and escalation patterns underlying malicious gifting behaviours, especially in mediated environments where system design, anonymity and persistent reputations interact (Consalvo, 2009; Taylor, 2018; Wohn & Freeman, 2020).

Social Influence

Traditional gifts are often associated with fostering social solidarity and reinforcing communal bonds (Mauss, 1925). Even negative aspects of gifting, such as obligations, typically serve to maintain relational ties. However, current research has not adequately addressed the impact of anti-gifts, understood as concrete manifestations of malicious reciprocity, on community dynamics and social trust. Acts that weaponize the form of the gift can fracture alliances, trigger cycles of revenge and foster atmospheres of suspicion, particularly in tightly knit online worlds where histories of interaction are visible and reputational memories are long (Taylor, 2006; Consalvo, 2009). At the same time, emerging work on online toxicity and conflict suggests that hostile practices can paradoxically strengthen solidarity within targeted groups, as shared experiences of attack and collective responses to aggressors help consolidate in-group identities (Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Aydin et al., 2023). Yet these dynamics have not been theorised in relation to gifting: there is little understanding of how anti-gifts circulate within networks, how they reshape patterns of obligation and retaliation, or how they contribute simultaneously to community fragmentation and cohesion in virtual worlds. Investigating how these practices disrupt social structures, both online and offline, is critical for understanding their broader implications. By articulating malicious reciprocity and anti-gift as distinct but related extensions of the “dark side of gift”, this thesis opens a new space for analysing adversarial exchange in MMORPGs and provides a conceptual bridge between classical theories of reciprocity and

contemporary research on digital conflict and toxicity.

3.9. Conclusion

This chapter has established a critical theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of gift-giving across traditional, consumer, and digital contexts. It began by exploring the anthropological roots of gift exchange, emphasizing the significance of reciprocity and the moral obligations that underpin social cohesion. The discussion on the dichotomy between gifts and commodities revealed the complexities of these interactions, challenging binary categorizations and highlighting the fluidity between economic and symbolic exchanges. Building on Sherry's (1983) influential framework, the chapter extended the analysis to digital environments, where virtual gifts and CGEs challenge traditional notions of reciprocity, agency, and relational dynamics. The integration of ANT and object-oriented ontology provided a lens to examine the active roles of non-human entities in reshaping social networks and gifting behaviors. Additionally, the review of the dark side of gift-giving was extended through the notions of malicious reciprocity and anti-gifts, showing how gift-like practices can be used not only to sustain solidarity but also to organize conflict, exploitation, and symbolic harm in both offline and virtual settings. By identifying critical theoretical gaps, such as how hybrid forms of reciprocity emerge in digital contexts, how CGEs and other non-human entities reshape the logic of exchange, and how anti-gift practices operate as concrete manifestations of malicious reciprocity, this chapter refines the conceptual space in which the present study intervenes. These gaps directly inform the empirical and analytical focus of the thesis, guiding the subsequent chapters to examine how gifting and anti-gifting practices unfold in MMORPGs and how they reconfigure social relations, obligations, and community dynamics in virtual worlds. The following chapter therefore turns to the methodological design of the study, detailing the interpretive, multi-method approach used to investigate these phenomena in depth and to connect the theoretical framework developed here with the empirical material collected in digital game environments.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the philosophical position, methodological choices, and research procedures adopted in carrying out the empirical research on virtual gifting, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift practices in MMORPGs. Building on interpretive research approaches, this research employs an ethnographic research strategy that triangulates historical documentary analysis, netnography and in-depth interviews. The chapter is structured as follows. The first part introduces the philosophical stances of this research, including ontology and epistemology of the study. The next part presents the research design, which explains in detail the inductive research approach and its alignment with an interpretivist, qualitative and ethnographic tradition. The following sections describe the three methodological phases conducted in this research, namely historical documentary analysis, netnography and in-depth interview. Considerations of ethical issues for each phase are discussed at the end. Throughout the chapter, gift and gift exchange theory provide the core theoretical lens for formulating the research questions and interpreting the data, while an actor-network oriented perspective is used analytically to trace how human and non-human actors such as players, avatars, NPCs, items and systems are configured within MMORPG gifting and anti-gift networks.

4.2. Research Philosophy

This section presents the research philosophy of our research. The term research philosophy refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge. It is believed that methodology address the question of “how” to conduct the research, while the philosophical introspection is necessary for choosing the most appropriate methodology for the research problem (Holden and Lynch, 2004). Philosophy goes beyond the boundaries of different disciplines and asks questions that challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions (Williams and May, 1996). It offers a theoretical map that help researchers to refine and choose their research methods

(Benton and Craib, 2023). Previous literature has noted that the choice of research methodology should follow the philosophical stances of researchers as well as the nature of the phenomenon to be examined (e.g., Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Holden and Lynch, 2004). On this basis, it is essential to maintain consistency between the research objectives, research questions, research methods and philosophical position of the researcher. In this thesis, such consistency is particularly important because the study seeks to understand how players in MMORPGs experience and interpret virtual gifts, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gifts, and how these practices are embedded in specific socio-technical contexts. The following parts will respectively discuss the research philosophy and the stances of ontology and epistemology in this research.

Research philosophical positions contain important assumptions and reflect the researcher's view of the world. The philosophical perspective is related to several core assumptions concerning two dimensions: the nature of society and the nature of science (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). These assumptions will underpin research strategy and the methods chosen as part of the strategy.

It is believed that the most comprehensive philosophical framework based on these dimensions has been developed by Burrell and Morgan (1979). Accordingly, objectivism and subjectivism have been described as a continuum's polar opposites with varying philosophical positions aligned between them (Holden and Lynch, 2004). It is important for researcher to address the assumptions of ontology (the nature of reality and the study of being), and epistemology (the relationship between reality and the process of knowing) issues as the grounding stance for their research.

In the field of social science, it is usually recognized that the positivism(objectivism) and interpretivism(subjectivism) are two predominant philosophical stances. Both of these research approaches include theories and methods based on different goals and underlying assumptions (Anderson, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Laudan, 1984; Shulman, 1986). These underlying philosophical assumptions include beliefs about the nature of reality,

of social beings, and of what constitutes knowledge.

In this research, interpretivism is taken as the philosophical position. Interpretivism develops as a critique of positivism from a subjectivist perspective. It emphasizes that humans are different from physical phenomena because they create, negotiate and transform meanings in specific contexts, which are then studied by interpretivists (Saunders et al., 2009). The purpose of interpretivist research is to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts. Interpretive researchers assume that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments (Myers, 2008). According to the interpretivist approach, researchers act as “a social actor” to analyze differences between people (Saunders et al., 2009). They should shift from the traditional scientific posture of personal distance and a priori theoretical structure to one of trying to understand consumers’ experiences in their own terms (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986). In the context of this study, this means attending closely to how players themselves describe, feel and reason about giving and receiving virtual gifts, engaging in harmful or exploitative practices that can be understood as anti-gifts, and negotiating obligations, gratitude, resentment and revenge within MMORPG communities. As the research questions of this study focus on the personal experience and feelings of consumers in a specific context with an aim to explore the problems caused by consumers in a social environment, this research has taken an interpretivist approach, and the following sections will discuss the ontological and epistemological stances in this research. This interpretivist stance aligns with drawing primarily on gift and gift exchange theory to make sense of virtual gifting and anti-gifting as meaningful social acts, and with using an actor-network oriented perspective to follow how these acts are configured through relationships between human and non-human actors in virtual worlds.

4.2.1. Ontology

Ontology is a branch of metaphysics that addresses the nature of reality. It seeks to identify whether reality truly exists or whether it is simply the product of one’s own

consciousness (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). It is crucial for social researchers to address the ontological assumptions, as the ontology determines what the researchers seek to understand through research. Further, the understanding of reality also determines how researchers go about researching reality, which would make them most effectively design their research to capture the reality.

The discussion on research philosophy highlights two ontological positions, referred to as positivism and interpretivism (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Positivism posits that social phenomena and their meanings exist independently of social actors, implying that social phenomena and categories used in everyday discourse exist independently or separately from actors (Bryman, 2008; Burrell and Morgan, 2017). The social world, like the physical world, exists independently of individuals' perceptions as a real, concrete, and unchanging structure. Positivists view a single unchanging reality as existing, which is divisible and fragmentable (Ozanne and Hudson, 1989), and precise, accurate measurements and observations of this world are possible (Bagozzi, 1980; Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Morgan and Smircich, 1980). Although individual inquiries may only approximate this reality, eventually, all inquiries will converge on the same objective reality, or the "truth" (Ford, 1975). Positivism also holds a deterministic view towards the nature of social beings, that is, individuals behave reactively, in a response-reinforcement fashion, to the external world (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Rubinstein, 1981).

In contrast, interpretivists posit that reality is essentially mental and perceived, with theories and categories created to help individuals make sense of their worlds (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). They argue that reality is socially constructed, as knowledge is developed, transmitted, and maintained in social situations. According to interpretivism, social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors, and social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but are in a constant state of revision (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Therefore, no amount of inquiry can converge on a single reality because multiple realities exist

and are changing. Furthermore, reality is composed of systems that depend on other systems for their meaning (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It is critical for the researcher to understand the context of a behavior or event because social beings construct reality and give it meaning based on context.

This research takes an interpretivist ontological stance, which implies that social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena ‘out there’ and separate from those involved in their construction. Specially, this research aims to explore the concept of “reality” within the virtual worlds constructed by online games. It is unquestionable that the reality within virtual worlds varies based on context. The broad scope of virtual worlds refers to the overall online game environment, but it is a constantly evolving “universe” that iterated and accumulated through the worldviews of specific online games. Each specific game world is co-constructed by developers, operators, and consumers, forming a “galaxy” and “planet” based on different game content, which then produces distinctive social characteristics. These independent characteristics collectively form and shape social behaviors within the universal virtual world. Therefore, the reality within virtual worlds is a multi-faceted reality that continuously changes with the social environment.

Additionally, this environment is constantly revised with the introduction of new gaming products. Some previous gaming mechanisms may have given special social meanings, but as these mechanisms are phased out with system updates, their social meanings become historical. However, it is undeniable that the appearance of these mechanisms did indeed change the trajectory of history and have an indelible impact on future generations. For example, specific trading systems, loot distribution rules or cross-faction encounter mechanisms have shaped particular understandings of generosity, entitlement, exploitation and revenge, and these meanings continue to influence later practices even when the mechanics are redesigned. This is also the reason why the research context includes both past and present time points, as we hope to obtain relatively comprehensive evidence to support our research by investigating

the social realities of virtual worlds on different timelines of their establishment and development. It is clearly unreasonable to interpret these phenomena separately without considering the specific context of the time period, as this would cause them to lose their specific meaning. The interpretivist ontological stance therefore supports treating historical archives, contemporary netnographic observations and interview accounts as different windows onto multiple, evolving realities of gifting, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift practices in MMORPGs.

4.2.2. Epistemology

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which is concerned with knowledge and how we can come to know things (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). It is the investigation of the basis of knowledge concerning reality, that is, what we know and understand about objects under investigation. Epistemology is crucially important in business research. As researchers seek to make sense of phenomena by gathering and analyzing data, consideration of epistemological issues provides a means to ensure the knowledge produced is sound.

Generally, a given ontology will imply a particular epistemology, as a particular understanding of reality will imply a particular understanding of how knowledge would be generated from that reality (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Corresponding to ontology, epistemology is also divided into two positions, which are usually referred to positivism and interpretivism (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Positivism is an epistemological position which is informed by an objectivist ontological position. Positivists perceive the world as objectively real and existing independently of human existence. They view the world as an orderly and structured place governed by physical laws. Positivist epistemology asserts that knowledge can only be acquired through systematic and objective gathering of facts, primarily through experimental methods and hypothesis testing, to gradually develop laws. Positivists emphasize adherence to scientific protocols, which entail identifying a conceptual framework and employing a controlled environment that separates researchers from subjects to ensure accurate, reproducible results that can be

generalized (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Based on their goals and their assumptions of reality, positivists seek out general, abstract laws that ideally can be applied to an infinitely large number of phenomena, people, settings, and times. According to Hunt (1983), positivists emphasize the importance of identifying causal linkages and believe that human behavior can be explained as the result of preceding real causes. They further assume a deterministic view of human nature, which supports their effort to identify the causes of individuals' behaviors. Positivist researchers endorse a pronounced separation between themselves and their subjects, with the assumption that the researcher does not influence and is independent from the subject. The development of research questions, designs, settings, etc., relies on the expertise of the researchers. To maintain objectivity, a prerequisite for legitimate knowledge (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982), a detached stance is necessary. Positivists believe that researchers can minimize or control for their own influence on the object of inquiry and thus attain a privileged vantage point from which to view their subjects.

On comparison, interpretivism hold the viewpoint that the world is continuously changing and meanings are shifting and contested. Interpretivists believe reality is relative and multiple, and interpreting these multiple meanings can be challenging because they rely on other systems for interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While interpretivists may identify patterns of behavior, they fundamentally believe that the world is too complex and changeable to establish causal relationships (Thompson et al., 1989). The interpretivist perspective views entities as mutually and simultaneously shaping the world holistically (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubinstein, 1981), which supports the voluntarist assumption about the nature of social beings. Regarding research relationships, interpretivists hold that researchers and individuals under investigation interact with each other, creating a cooperative inquiry (Reason & Rowan, 1981; Wallendorf, 1987). If social reality is based on individuals' or groups' perceptions, then to understand those perceptions, individuals must participate in the research process. Thus, the individual being studied becomes a participant in the experiment,

guiding the research while supplying information.

Our research takes the interpretivism epistemology position, the focus of which is on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of the world by its participants. As we pointed out earlier, the virtual world tends to be a result of multiple realities constantly superimposed and iterated. The research requires the integration of researchers and the acquisition of investigation results in a dynamic context. Therefore, interpretivism epistemology is a more appropriate choice. Operationally, this means that knowledge is generated through close engagement with players' own accounts and practices, rather than through detached measurement. The researcher immerses in MMORPG communities, observes in-game and extra-game interactions through netnography, and conducts in-depth interviews in which players narrate concrete episodes of gifting, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift in their own terms. This epistemological stance is consistent with drawing primarily on gift and gift exchange theory, which treats gifts and counter-gifts as meaningful social acts embedded in webs of obligation and reciprocity, and with using an actor-network oriented lens to attend to how such knowledge is co-produced by human actors and digital infrastructures in virtual worlds.

4.3. Research Design

This section presents the research design of this research. Drawing on an ethnography research approach, this study takes an inductive research logic and adopts the qualitative methodology. Following this ethnography research approach, a triangulation of methods is used to comprehensively interpret the research findings. More specifically, the study is organized into three interrelated phases: historical documentary analysis, netnography and in-depth interviews, which together provide a layered view of virtual gifting, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift practices in MMORPGs. The following parts detail and justify the key choices of design.

4.3.1. Research Logic

Research logic refers to the relationship between theory and research. It determines

whether a top-down or bottom-up research process would be taken in the research (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Two general forms of logical reasoning, deduction and induction, are commonly used in every type of research.

Deduction is generally defined as the deriving of a conclusion by reasoning (Johnson-Laird and Byrne, 1991). It is commonly understood as reasoning from the general to the particular. A deductive approach is concerned with developing a hypothesis (or hypotheses) based on existing theory, and then designing a research strategy to test the hypothesis. The researcher studies what others have done, reads existing theories of whatever phenomenon they are studying, and then tests hypotheses that emerge from those theories (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Generally, a deductive approach is aligned with the research goal of objectivists, as they identify causal explanations and fundamental laws that explain regularities in human social behaviour (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). To achieve this end, the generalization of results from ample sample sizes is necessary utilizing a hypothetico-deductive process. This process entails the formulation of hypotheses developed from the researcher's conceptualization of a particular phenomenon.

In contrast, induction refers specifically to “inference of a generalized conclusion from particular instances.” In other words, it means forming a generalization based on what is known or observed, with the aims to generate meanings from the data collected in order to identify patterns and relationships to build a theory (Thomas, 2006). Inductive analysis refers to approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher. This understanding of inductive analysis is consistent with Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) description: “The researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (p. 12). The general inductive approach provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings.

Facing the context of online games, an inductive research logic is taken in this study.

Inductive approach allows researchers to observe patterns and behaviors that emerge from gameplay and interaction. Virtual worlds are complex and dynamic environments that are shaped by a variety of contextual factors, such as social norms, cultural values, and technological infrastructures, where multiple factors interact to produce emergent phenomena. The bottom-up approach allows researchers to capture this complexity by identifying and analyzing patterns and behaviors that may not be immediately apparent, which could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the underlying dynamics of virtual worlds and their impact on players' experiences and behaviors. In this research, inductive logic is used to allow concepts such as virtual gift, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift to be refined and extended through engagement with historical archives, netnographic observations and interview narratives, rather than being fixed in advance, while gift and gift exchange theory provide the main sensitizing framework that guides this process.

4.3.2. Type of Methodology

Research methodology refers to the methods and techniques used to portray the research effectively. It concerns the systematic design of a study to guarantee results that meet the aims and objectives of the study. Generally, the types of research could be divided into quantitative and qualitative (Bryman, 2006). Quantitative research is a research strategy that focuses on quantifying the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2008). It involves testing theories through empirical investigation of observable phenomena using mathematical models and statistical analysis. Quantitative focuses on collecting numerical data to understand relationships and is widely utilized in natural, applied, formal, and social sciences (Kolmogorov, 1965). The objective of quantitative research is to develop and employ hypotheses pertaining to phenomena by measuring quantitative data.

While qualitative research is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting (Creswell et

al., 2007). Qualitative research is based on social science disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology (Mohajan, 2018). Therefore, qualitative research methods allow for in-depth and further investigation and questioning of the interviewees based on their answers, and the interviewer/researcher also tries to understand their motivations and feelings. Understanding how the audience makes decisions can help researchers reach conclusions in market research.

Aligned with the interpretivism philosophy and inductive research logic, this study adopts qualitative methods to carry out the research. Interpretivist approach is based on naturalistic approach of data collection such as in-depth interviews and observations. Consequently, interpretivism philosophy places greater emphasis on qualitative analysis over quantitative analysis, as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the meanings and interpretations that underlie social behavior and interaction. Moreover, the inductive approach is a systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data, in which the analysis is guided by specific evaluation objectives. This approach also aligns with interpretivism philosophy as it recognizes the importance of context and the need to derive meaning from the data rather than imposing preconceived categories or theories on it. By focusing on the specific objectives of the research and allowing the data to guide the analysis process, the inductive approach provides a rigorous framework for uncovering patterns, themes, and insights that might otherwise be overlooked. Thus, adopting qualitative methods in this study allows for a deeper exploration of the complex social phenomena under investigation. In particular, qualitative methods are well suited to capturing the nuanced ways in which players talk about obligation, generosity, resentment, revenge and solidarity around virtual gifts and anti-gifts, and to exploring how these meanings are negotiated in interaction with avatars, NPCs, game systems and other non-human actors in MMORPGs. By prioritizing naturalistic data collection techniques and a systematic, inductive approach to analysis, the study can generate rich, nuanced findings that contribute to our understanding of the virtual world.

4.3.3. Research Strategy

Research strategy is the general orientation to the conduct of research (Bryman 2008). It provides the overall direction of the research including the process by which the research is conducted (Remenyi et al, 2003). It is one of the elements of research methodology and includes the process in which research is carried out. Saunders et al (2009) mentioned that appropriate research strategy has to be selected based on research questions and objectives, the extent of existing knowledge on the subject area to be researched, the amount of time and resources available, and the philosophical underpinnings of the researcher. Despite that various research strategies exist, there are large overlaps among them and hence the important consideration would be to select the most advantageous strategy for a particular research study (Yin, 2003; Saunders et al., 2009).

In line with our research questions and philosophical paradigm, we have taken an ethnographic approach. Ethnography is a type of qualitative research that involves immersing in a particular community or organization to observe people's behavior and interactions up close. It is a flexible research method that allows researcher to gain a deep understanding of a group's shared culture, conventions, and social dynamics (Carson et al, 2001). While originated in the field of anthropology, it is used not only to study distant or unfamiliar cultures, but also to study specific communities within the researcher's own society. Generally, ethnography enables researchers to more authentically information and spontaneously observe dynamics (Martyn, 2006). It aims to offer a rich narrative account of a specific culture and allow researchers to explore many different aspects of the group and setting (Brewer, 2000).

However, regarding this research, ethnography may have some limitations. Previous literatures have questioned the authenticity of data in the Internet environment (Martyn, 2006). The original form of anthropological ethnography placed great emphasis on the researcher's participation in, and first-hand observation of, the culture being investigated. By contrast, the data may lose authenticity as collected on the Internet

without meeting the people concerned face-to-face (Poster, 1990). In addition, ethnography may run the risk of bias caused by subjective observer and limited research time (Belk, 2007).

Aiming to solve problems caused by limitations of research methods, this study adopts the strategy of triangulation. Triangulation is defined as the combination of two or more data sources, investigators, methodologic approaches, or theoretical perspectives within the same study (Denzin, 1970). Specifically, this research uses within-method methodological triangulation, which involves combining various procedures from the same design approach (Kimchi et al., 1991). In this study, the primary research method is netnography conducted in the context of Internet-based virtual worlds, while historical documentary analysis and in-depth interviews act as complementary procedures. The multi-method triangulation aims to eliminate limitations caused by a single method. By using multiple methods, researchers strive to decrease the “deficiencies and biases that stem from any single method” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 19) and “create the potential for counterbalancing the flaws or weaknesses of one method with the strengths of another” (p. 21).

Figure 4 summarizes how this triangulated strategy is implemented across the three empirical phases and how it connects to the later findings chapters. Read vertically, the figure shows that Phase 1 historical documentary work reconstructs early configurations of virtual gifting, emerging online markets and proto anti-gift practices in Chinese MMORPGs. Phase 2 netnography then traces how these elements reappear in contemporary play, capturing ongoing gifting, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift interactions as they unfold inside guilds, raids and open-world encounters. Phase 3 in-depth interviews build on these two phases by inviting players to reflect on these practices, to explain how they perceive world rules, commercial mechanisms and digital entities, and to articulate how gift, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift dynamics are experienced from their own perspective.

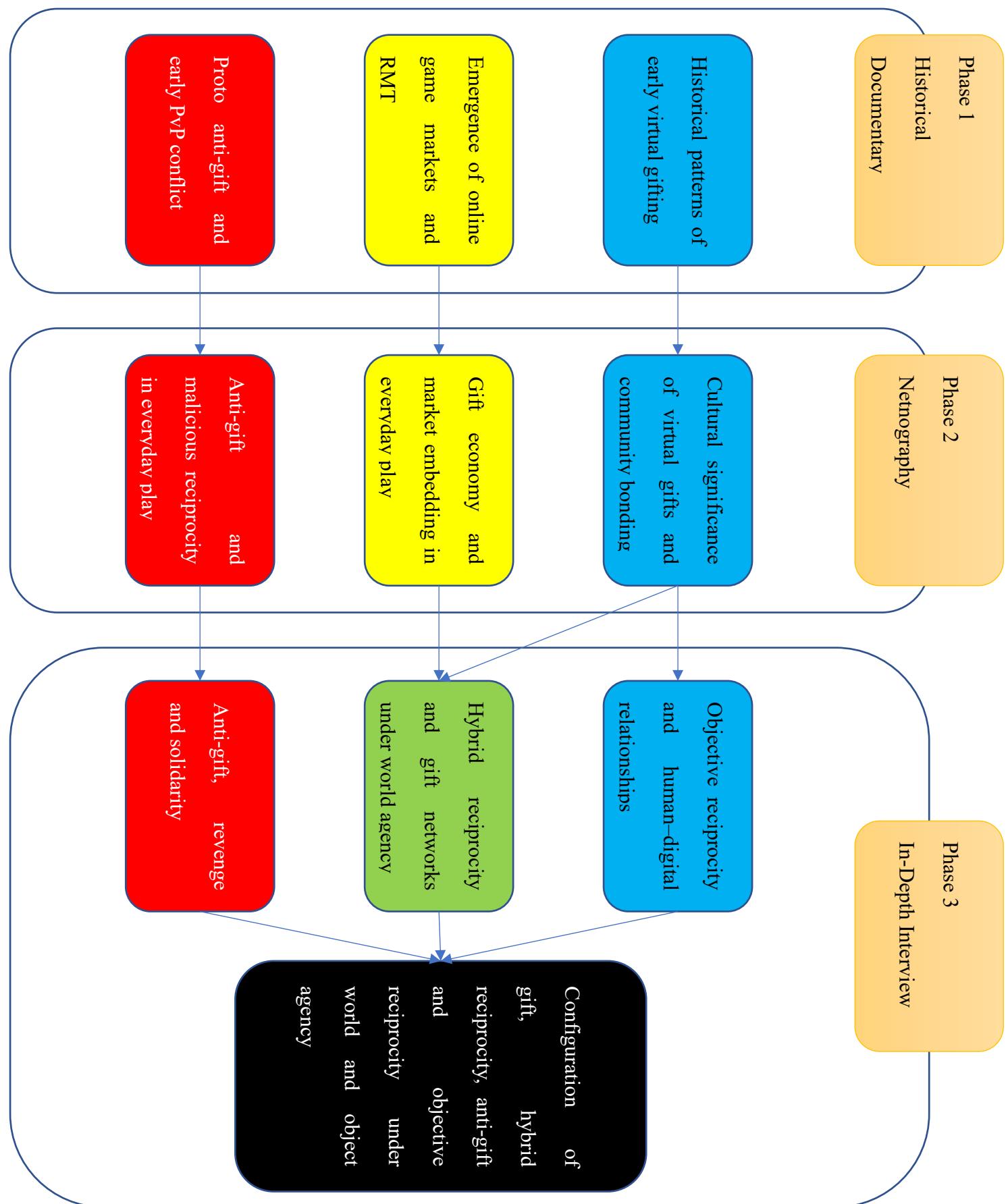


Figure 4 Research Phases and Findings

Source: Researcher-generated.

Read horizontally, the figure also highlights the parallel analytical strands that run through the thesis. One strand follows the evolution of gifting and reciprocity from early virtual gifts to contemporary community networks and objective reciprocity in human–digital relationships. A second strand tracks anti-gift and malicious reciprocity from early PvP conflict to everyday marauding, chasing kills and guild wars, and finally to interview narratives in which conflict, revenge and solidarity are closely intertwined. A third strand focuses on world and market agency, moving from the emergence of online game markets to live-service mechanisms that blend gifts and monetization, and then to players’ interpretations of commercial strategies, balance changes and anti-cheat systems. Bringing these strands and phases together provides a more robust configuration of the actor networks involved in virtual gifting and anti-gifting, and prepares the ground for the later chapters that analyze how these dynamics are formed, maintained and transformed in MMORPGs. The study begins with the use of historical documentary analysis to establish general recognition of the virtual world. Further observation and investigation are then conducted through parallel netnography and in-depth interviews. The following sections elaborate on the three phases of the study in more detail.

4.4. Phase 1 – Historical Documentary

4.4.1. Introduction

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, including both printed and electronic materials (Fischer, 2006). Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Document analysis is often used in combination with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation. By triangulating data, the researcher attempts to provide a joining together of evidence that leads to credibility (Rapley, 2007). By examining information collected through different methods, the researcher can validate findings traversing data sets and consequently

reduce the impact of probable biases that can exist in a single study. Aiming to understand the history, philosophy and operation of the phenomena that researchers concern with, documentary is frequently employed to gather background information of the research context (Armstrong, 2021). Besides, it could also determine if implementation of the research directly reflects the designed routes. Reviewing existing documents also helps researchers to better understand the context and phenomena they are evaluating, and thus to formulate other methods taken in the research (Bowen, 2009).

Within this study, document analysis in Phase 1 is used to reconstruct the historical development of Chinese online games and virtual worlds, with particular attention to how virtual gifts, game markets and conflict-based exchanges emerged and became stabilized. This longitudinal perspective provides the background against which later chapters analyze virtual gifts, hybrid reciprocity, anti-gift practices and human–CGE interactions in contemporary MMORPGs.

As mentioned above, historical documentary was adopted in our research as a secondary data collection method, but it has laid the foundation at the beginning of our research, as it provided us a comprehensive understanding of the online game and virtual world from a historical lens. By capturing snapshots of the development of online communities at different time points, Phase 1 helps to explain why certain contemporary phenomena around gifting, anti-gift and sociality appear in the way they do. It enables us to compare current practices identified through netnography and in-depth interviews with their “older versions” in earlier games and communities, and to read present findings as part of a longer trajectory of change rather than as isolated incidents. As a complementary and supporting data approach, it has also provided evidence and reference to the data obtained in netnography and in-depth interviews, which has enriched and deepened the data sources.

4.4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

As Stefk (1997)’s metaphor indicates, the online community once refers to the online library, a repository for publishing and storing collective knowledge, a form of

communal or collective memory. The review and analysis of the archives from this source are often considered to be included in the area of netnography. Kozinets (2015) also mentions that netnography may include other methods like videography and content analysis. In this research, however, this phase is treated as historical documentary and archival research rather than as netnography, because the focus is on past traces of interaction and on reconstructing earlier configurations of online gaming cultures rather than on participating in currently active communities. The online communities have evolved with the development of information technology, and the characteristics of social activities in the community have also changed accordingly. This makes the distinction from research methods to research results necessary. Besides, the analysis of archived online textual data by researchers who did not participate in the communities through which data was created is perhaps more appropriately categorized as archival research than as netnography or ethnography (Costello et al. 2017).

The historical documents reviewed include documents, posts, videos and other forms of records that are stored and published by consumers on the network. The historical materials we have reviewed are ranging from 2005 till 2021. We chose 2005 as the start point because it was the first year when MMORPGs made a figure in Chinese online gaming market and online players started to take records of their gaming life (Figure 5). We reviewed records kept in forms of posts, articles and videos in websites like post bars (e.g., Baidu Tieba), forums (e.g., National Geographic of Azeroth, NGA) and video platforms (e.g., Bilibili and Youku). As Table 2 shows, these websites are generally considered to be online communities closely related to online gaming. As we mentioned in the Chapter 2, these game-related communities complement the player's virtual life, filling in the gaming experience when they are not playing. By the discussions, texts and even video records they made and uploaded, they generally shared their stories of online friendships, the experience of virtual goods acquisitions, and remarkable events in their virtual life. These materials helped us to get general understandings of the online gaming from a historical and developing lens and enabled us to make comparisons of

gaming experience between different periods of time.

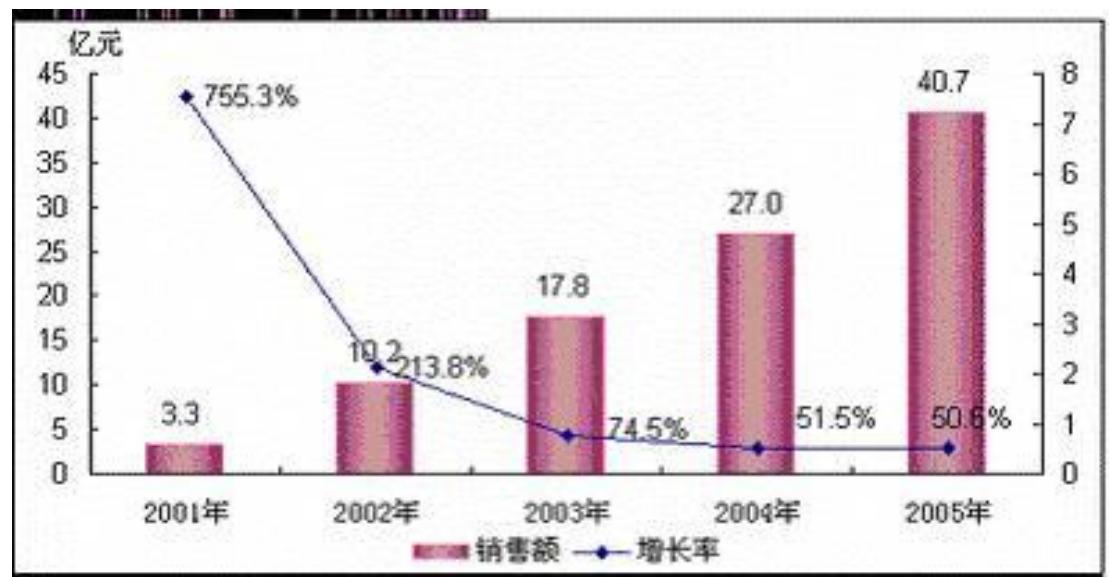


Figure 5 Sales and Growth rates of MMORPG in China, 2001-2005

Source: Image adapted from an article on 17173.com (accessed via news.17173.com).

Data analysis is often described as a consequential procedure to data collection in research. The most common analysis approach in marketing studies is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves coding and categorizing the data for emerging patterns and themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Spiggle, 1994). In our research, we analyzed and interpreted the data in a thematic way. Among the data analysis strategy in documentary, thematic analysis is a form of pattern recognition within the data, with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The process of analyzing documents involves cautious and focused re-reading and review of data. The researcher conducts a thorough examination of selected data, performs coding and category construction based on data characteristics, and reveals themes relevant to the phenomenon under study. Such codes and the resulting themes facilitate integration of data collected through diverse methods. In this phase, themes derived from historical documentary work mainly trace the emergence of virtual gifting, the evolution of game markets, and early forms of cooperative and conflictual exchange, which are later connected to the findings from netnography and interviews. Researchers are expected to present research material fairly and respond to even subtle cues during selection and

analysis of data from documents. The strength of this strategy lies in its ability to support theme interpretation with data and to apply to research questions beyond individual experiences.

Name	Type	Websites	Description
NGA(National Geographic of Azeroth)	Online Forum	www.ngacn.cc	The only Chinese site officially certified by the Blizzard Fansite Program.
Baidu Tieba	Post Bar	tieba.baidu.com	The earliest “topic-based” online community platform in China.
Bilibili	Video Platform	www.bilibili.com	The largest Chinese video-sharing website dedicated to the creation and sharing of ACG (Anime, Comic, and Game) content.
Youku	Video Platform	www.youku.com	One of the world's first online video websites. The earliest we-media video platform in China.

Table 2 Data Source of Historical Archives

4.5. Phase 2 - Netnography

4.5.1. Introduction

Netnography (Kozinets, 2002; 2015) is developed from the traditional ethnography. Ethnography as an anthropological method is used to understand and learn about cultures. Similarly, netnography uses ethnographic research methods to study the online communities and online cultures that are emerging through Internet technology-mediated communications (Kozinets, 2002; 2006). Netnographic methods are increasingly used in recent study of communications in online communities (Kozinets 2002, Langer and Beckman 2005). There are series of netnography literatures on such as Kozinets (1997;1998;2002;2006;2015) and other scholars (e.g., Langer and Beckman, 2005), among which Kozinets (2015) is believed to lay out the foundation for the conduct of netnographic research. Kozinets (2015, p.101) explained that Netnography is the name of “a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical

and representation practices, where a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet". The participation and observation of online discourses enable insights into the attitudes, meanings, and consumption discourses of online groups (Kozinets, 2002; 2006; 2015). Therefore, in line with the study of online context, the netnographic approach is appropriate to observe, analyze and interpret the social interactions of online consumers.

Compared to other research methods, netnography is cheaper, quicker and less obtrusive in social research (Kozinets, 2002). The participant-observation enable researchers to direct observe the behaviours of consumers as both individuals and within groups. The nature of netnography enables researchers to access the aspects of online social life that might not be possible through other methods (Kozinets, 2010). But there are also limitations when conducting netnography. Researchers require high interpretive skills in order to understand online consumer communities and gather relevant data, as netnography is completely focused on online behaviour and virtual contexts. Besides, the more textual and less virtual nature of online communication may miss the richness of in-person communications with facial and vocal expression.

In this research, Phase 2 adopts netnography as the primary method to investigate gifting, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift practices in MMORPG contexts. This phase builds directly on the interpretivist, qualitative and ethnographic stance outlined earlier, and allows the researcher to follow players, avatars, guilds and systems *in situ* as they construct and negotiate virtual gifts, conflicts and relationships. Regarding the virtual nature of online games, our research has taken netnography as the primary method. On one hand, the online community and online culture formed by online players are suitable for netnography conduction. On the other hand, the virtual world created by online games allows players to interact socially with avatars as their own representatives, which to some extent gives us a more visual social context. Netnography is also compatible with the actor-network sensibility of this thesis,

because it traces how human and non-human actors are connected through everyday practices in online environments. In addition, as an experienced online player, the researcher is in a unique position to understand and interpret the data collected in online games. Our conduction of netnography have followed Kozinets (2002; 2015)'s steps including research planning, culture entrée, data collection and analysis, and ethical standards. The following sections will introduce the details of our netnography conduction.

4.5.2. Selection of Online Community

In this section we will introduce the online community that we conduct the netnography in. As Kozinets (2015) points out, netnography has consistently focused on constructs of online community and online culture. Online community has faced with an evolvement in line with the development of information technology. Consumers are enabled to get together in the online world regardless of time or location, and could access each other and join groups based on a cultural interest (Kozinets, 1999). The definition of online community has changed throughout times. Rheingold (1993) regards virtual communities as the earliest type of online communities, which are defined as “Social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p.5). Further definition like Rokka (2010), basing on his work with Moisander (Rokka and Moisander, 2009), conceptualizes online communities as new “translocal sites of the social ...i.e. not global or local but as contexts which are both transnational and local” (Roka, 2020, p.382). Recent online communities may evolve around different structures of online communications such as blogs, wikis, audio/visual sites, social content aggregators, social networking sites and online forums. “These social groups have a 'real' existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior” (Kozinets, 1998, p.366).

The identification of online community is one of the important preparations for researchers who adopt netnography. Researchers must have specific marketing research

questions and then identify particular online forums appropriate to the types of questions that are of interest to them (Kozinets, 2002). Kozinets (2002) has distinguished several types of online communities such as boards, web pages, lists, multiuser dungeons and chatrooms. He also admits that the categories may evolve according to the development of the Internet. Consequently, researcher needs to make a preliminary decision regarding the structure of them.

Regarding the research questions on the context of online games, our research has identified and selected online communities inside/outside the game client. First, the virtual world constituted by online games has undoubtedly become our main research context, in which consumers create their game characters (avatars) as their personal representative to participate in the activities, initiate and accept the social interaction with others. The virtual world is the source of all social activities occurred both inside and outside the gaming environment. Secondly, beyond the gaming world itself, online players have also formed other online social aggregations. They are not necessarily active in sync with in-game activities, but rather provide a space for spontaneous communication among players. For instance, the tribes and guilds in the game often create online gaming groups that correspond to the in-game organizations, which usually take the form of chat groups in instant messaging software like QQ and MSN. These chat groups allow players to continue their communications with other members both online and offline of the game.

The online websites as well as social medias have also provided opportunities for communications and discussions of players. As Kozinets (2015) suggests the use of searching engine to identified these online mediums, we choose several online platforms including Baidu Tieba, *JX3* official forum and *JX3* section in National Geographic of Azeroth (NGA) forum, as well as social media website of Weibo (See also Section 4.4.2). On former public platforms, players' posts could be related to the game activities like guild recruitment, could teach the readers how to pass specific missions, or could share their own experiences within the game. Players routinely refer

to these discussion forums to post opinions, place enquiries and receive answers (Kozinets, 1999). This means that these forums can be simultaneously general and specialized, as all the players have equal opportunities to participate and post their own messages and enquiries. Such discussion forums are typically used to build relationships between members. In contrast, players on social media are more likely to share their notes. The difference is that, as a broader platform, social media networks for specific game products are built around topics and hashtags, which is similar to the concept of brand public (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016) that is not limited by a specific product or brand but a wider space for discussion.

It should be noted that the public websites could also offer easier procedures for data archival with access to detailed and rich-data experience from various participants (Kozinets, 2002). In addition to netnography, we also reviewed some previous records of players on these platforms, some of which are incorporated into the historical documentary work in Section 4.4, and, taken together, the in-game settings, instant-messenger groups and public websites cover three layers of the MMORPG ecosystem that are central to this thesis: in-game guilds and factions where gifts, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift practices are enacted in real time; instant-messenger groups that extend guild relations into everyday chat; and public forums and social media where players archive, narrate and debate gifting and conflict incidents.

4.5.3. Making Culture Entrée

After the identification of suitable online community, it is important for researcher to learn as much as possible about the forums, the groups, and the individual participants they seek to understand (Kozinets, 2015). Before initiating contact or data collection, the marketing researcher should be familiar with the characteristics, including group membership, market-oriented behaviors, interests, and language of the online community (Kozinets, 2002). This potentially means that the researcher is expected to make key decisions concerning how the research is going to be conducted, and how the researcher is going to represent himself to the community (Kozinets, 2002). The researcher communicate with members of the selected community rather than using

data from a website or a server (Kozinets, 2015). As a result, after the consent was granted, we spent some time familiarizing ourselves with the leaders and/or members of the online community before the formal data work began. The researcher's status as a professional player ensured that this process ran smoothly. But we did not cross the line to interfere in the affairs of some online community because of this special status. After all, participation required some involvement with members in instructible rather than leading the community or getting engaged in every type of community activity (Kozinets, 2010).

Before starting the data collection, we also made clear our research questions and research objectives again. As mentioned above, our research aims at the impact of social behaviors and interactions of players in online games on social relationships. At the beginning we didn't limit whether the social relationships we were looking at existed only in online society or extended to the real world. With the development of research, we have found it should be clear that although the online world via the Internet architecture is virtual, the social activities and social relationships of consumers in the online world are real. As a result, there is no need to separate the online and offline world when regarding the culture entrée. Netnography may be employed to study the cultures of both “online communities” and “communities online”. Kozinets (2015) further claims that online communities refer to the social phenomena occurring in online environment, including the issues of online identity and interactions basing on communication technology, while the communities online extend beyond the internet to offline practices that influenced by digital communication-mediated technology. Previous research tends to consider the former as a binary opposite of the latter. However, recent digital technology has allowed people to access the online world without necessarily sitting in front of fixed devices such as computers and laptops. A good example of this is the proliferation of mobile devices that allow players to be active in spin-off communities outside of the game worlds we discussed in the last section. Therefore, the design of netnography could be more dynamic and flexible,

subject to the contextual nature of the research subjects. Both “online communities” and “communities online” could be incorporated into the netnography data collection to enrich the empirical data.

As such, our research did not limit itself to the category of “online communities,” but rather included the comments and behaviors of consumers who access the virtual world in different ways, such as social media and self-media posts related to gaming. Our study sought to comprehensively investigate the impact of social behaviors and interactions of players in online games on social relationships, considering the diverse ways in which individuals engage with the virtual world. This is particularly important for understanding virtual gifting and anti-gift practices, because gifts, conflicts and negotiations often move fluidly between the game client, guild channels and wider social media spaces. This approach allowed us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of social interactions within online gaming communities and their impact on social relationships.

4.5.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection work of our netnography were conducted in two MMORPG products, *Jianxia Qingyuan 3(JX3)* and *Final Fantasy 14(FF14)*, as the two communities respectively represented the top streams of Chinese style online games and Japanese style online games respectively (Korkeila & Hamari, 2018; Chew, 2019). We also paid attention to the original top first MMORPG *World of Warcraft (WOW)*. Unfortunately, *WOW* had entered a period of decline and withdrew from the Chinese online game market in December 2022.

The researcher has engaged into 10 in-game guilds as both researcher and participant of the guild member. Table 3 gives a brief schedule of the guilds that we conducted the participation and observation. 7 guilds here are in the game product *JX3* and 3 in the game product *FF14*. The guilds are classified into several types by the gaming activities they attend most, including PVP faction activities, PVP activities, PVE activities and causal (PVX) activities. It should be noted that due to the absence of a free PVP system in *FF14*, guilds in this product will not include types of PVP guilds. There are more

details related to guild categories in Chapter 2.

Time Period	Guild Name	Game Product	Guild Type
02/2018-09/2018	114514	<i>Jianxia Qingyuan 3</i>	PVP Faction Guild
09/2018-12/2018	Mistiming	<i>Jianxia Qingyuan 3</i>	PVE Guild
	Hammer	<i>Jianxia Qingyuan 3</i>	PVP Friend Guild
02/2019-06/2019	Drunkard	<i>Jianxia Qingyuan 3</i>	PVP Faction Guild
08/2019-12/2019	24-Bridge	<i>Jianxia Qingyuan 3</i>	PVX Guild
01/2020-06/2020	Nightfall	<i>Jianxia Qingyuan 3</i>	PVP Friend Guild
	Piggy Peppa	<i>Jianxia Qingyuan 3</i>	PVE Guild
07/2020-12/2020	Grey Green	<i>Final Fantasy XIV</i>	PVE Guild
03/2021-09/2021	Black Cat	<i>Final Fantasy XIV</i>	PVX Guild
11/2021-03/2022	Old School	<i>Final Fantasy XIV</i>	PVX Guild

Table 3 Time Schedule of Netnography

Following Kozinets (2015), we conducted netnography participant-observation in these guilds. The participations are composed of two main parts. First is the gaming process in the virtual world through the game clients. The researcher was engaged in the gaming process with the guild members and participated in the in-game activities of most types, such as “daily mission”, “battle arena”, “guild combat” and so on. During the process, observations were taken on individual/collective behaviours in daily life and important events. Field notes were kept and the communications of texts and photographs were recorded by functions of chat recording and screenshot. The other participation refers to the chatting in online chatting groups of these guilds. The researcher attended in the daily chatting and formal conference that happened in the online groups of instant messaging software QQ and YY. Both programs have functions of automatically recording the texts. In addition, short netnographic interviews of 30 minutes have also been taken with the members in these guilds by the functions of private chatting. These structured interviews included only several brief questions and aimed to get their general experience and feelings towards how they recognized their

social behaviours and social relationships.

Besides, we have also reviewed the recent posts on online platforms including forums and social media such as WeChat Moments, QQ Space, and Weibo. The websites like post bars or forums often have “bars” or “sections” that are directly related to the game, which enhances the focus of our data collection and avoids the inclusion of irrelevant data. In the social media, we followed the official *JX3* Weibo account and *JX3*-related Weibo topics, and observed the comments of players below the account and topic.

The data we collected are thus categorized into several types. As Kozinets (2015) points out, netnography data assume three forms: “(1) already recorded and stored, or archival, data, (2) communicatively co-created, or research-practice elicited data, and (3) reflective/reflexive immersive/participative authored fieldnote data” (Kozinets, 2015, p.202). In our research, the first form refers to the texts and other archival data on online platforms and social media. The second form refers to the records taken in the chatting group, in-game participation and netnography interviews. And the third form refers to the field notes taken during the observations. Figure 6 shows an example of the first and second form of collected data in this research.

In line with the overall interpretivist and inductive stance of this thesis, data analysis in Phase 2 followed an inductive thematic approach. As mentioned above, this research takes a thematic way of data analysis. Regarding netnography, the data analysis occurred in parallel with data collection as outlined by Kozinets (2015). Gibbs (2007) indicated that there should be no separation between data collection and data analysis. He posited that concurrent analysis and data collection is a good practice to follow as it raises new research issues and questions. The researcher followed this approach to continually paralleled the data collection along with data analysis. Initial readings and open coding focused on concrete episodes of gifting, hybrid exchanges and anti-gift practices, as well as on players’ descriptions of their relationships with avatars, guilds, NPCs and the game world. We have generated different themes through the different periods of netnography conduction, and the content of themes have been enriched



Figure 6 Examples of Data Form in Netnography

Source: Still image from a video on Bilibili (BV1S4411J7rR).

several times by further data collection and analysis. These developing themes were then compared with insights from Phase 1 and later Phase 3, which allowed the study to triangulate across historical records, in-game observations and participants' own narratives.

4.6. Phase 3 – In-depth Interview

4.6.1. Introduction

Following the netnographic studies, the in-depth interview method in our research was adopted to validate and complement the findings. In-depth interview is a qualitative data collection method that allows for the collection of a large amount of information about the behavior, attitude and perception of the interviewees (Rosenthal, 2016). It is one of the core data collection activities of qualitative research. The in-depth interview seeks an in-depth understanding of a topic that the research informant is able to speak about (Belk, Fischer and Kozinets, 2012). During in-depth interviews, researchers and participants have the freedom to explore additional points and change the direction of the process when necessary. It is an independent research method that can adopt

multiple strategies according to the needs of the research.

There are many types of interviews, each with its particularities. In-depth interviews may have flexible structures and thus be classified into structured, semi-structured and unstructured. In our research, we mainly took unstructured interviews with the participants. The questions and structure of unstructured interview are not predetermined. Instead, a central idea or topic that covers a few points is typically chosen before the beginning, which allows the interviewer to cover areas appropriate for the interviewee. Such interactive process can reduce the sense of distance between researchers and participants and achieve the purpose of eliminating the pressure of interviewees, thus further discussing the personal experience and deep thoughts of them.

Within this study, Phase 3 interviews are used to elicit players' own narratives of virtual gifting, hybrid reciprocity, anti-gift practices, and their relationships with avatars, non-player characters (NPCs) and the game world. While Phase 2 netnography captures these phenomena through observation, in-depth interviews provide a complementary space in which participants can reflect on motives, feelings and meanings that may not be visible in public interactions. The development of the interview questions followed a structured process that moved from the overarching research questions to concrete, open-ended prompts, as discussed in Section 4.6.3 and illustrated through an example topic guide in Appendix 3.

4.6.2. Sampling Procedures

Recruitment of interviewees is one of the important preparatory works for the in-depth interview, which is also considered as a main challenge (Opdenakker, 2006). This research has taken the purposive sampling technique to conduct the participants recruitment. Purposive sampling refers to a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected because they have characteristics that need in sample (Etikan et al, 2016). This sampling method relies on the researcher's judgment when identifying and selecting the individuals, cases, or events that can provide the best information to achieve the study's objectives. The reason we chose the purposive sample was that we needed to make sure that the interviewee was a player who actually

had online game orientation and not just a tourist who dabbled in it.

The first source of interviewee is game groups. As we mentioned before, this kind of community is a gathering place of online players, which can ensure that our interviewees have their own opinions on the questions in the interview and avoid the possible failure in the interview process. In addition, the recruitment of interviewers in the netnographic online community can be a targeted and in-depth exploration of the details already embodied in netnography. Different from simple netnographic interviews, in-depth interviews explore the personal experience of participants in specific events. This is also in line with what we mentioned earlier that the in-depth interview is taken as a direct supplement and deepening of netnography in our research. Besides, our recruitment is beyond the online groups to the platforms such as forums and social medias. We published recruitment posts on these public communication platforms to express our researcher identity and the research purpose of the interview. We also had some interviewees included through personal contacts and snowballing in real life.

In line with the research objectives, particular attention was paid to recruiting informants who had sustained experience with MMORPGs and who had encountered situations related to gifting, hybrid reciprocity or conflict. By combining in-game recruitment, online community posts and offline contacts, the study sought to maximize variation in gender, age, length of gaming experience and types of guild participation, while still focusing on players who could speak in detail about their long-term engagement with virtual worlds.

Table 4 showcases the recruitment process of participants for in-depth interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in early 2020, our recruitment of interviewees was conducted in two stages. The first stage was prior to the pandemic (2017-2019), during which 80 participants were recruited. Of these, 39 participants within the netnographic community provided consent for further in-depth interviews. Additionally, 24 potential participants from the online community were recruited.

Furthermore, 17 interviewees were recruited from universities and internet-related companies through practical communication. In the second stage after the pandemic (2020-2022), a total of 28 participants were recruited, comprising 15 from in-game sources, 11 from the online community, and 2 from offline sources. To sum up, a total of 108 interviewees from different sources have been recruited in our research. According to the research objectives of our study and the requirements of the interviewees, 90 participants were finally valid, and the interview data of 85 people were finally used for data analysis. All the 85 interviewees have at least six months of gaming experience and have been involved in MMORPGs for more than three months in the recent year. They come from different backgrounds, varying in gender, age, and gaming experience. In general, the engagement of interviewees in the game ensured the smooth progress of our interview, and the diverse data collected through the in-depth interview also ensured the completeness of our data and subsequent research findings.

Time Period		2017-2019	2020-2022	Total
Total Participants		80(69 valid)	28(21 valid)	108(90 valid)
Source	In-game Recruitment	39 (33)	15 (10)	54 (43)
	Online Community	24 (21)	11 (9)	35 (30)
	Offline	17 (15)	2	19 (17)
Game Type	<i>Jianxia Qingyuan 3</i>	60 (51)	4 (2)	64 (53)
	<i>Final Fantasy XIV</i>	12 (10)	20 (16)	32 (26)
	Other Game Product	8	4 (3)	12 (11)
Interview Type	Online Interview	55 (48)	24 (18)	79 (66)
	Face to Face Interview	25 (21)	4 (3)	29 (24)

Table 4 Participants Recruitment of In-Depth Interview

4.6.3. Preparing Issues

Since the interviewees we recruit come from different sources and regions, our interviews were mainly carried out in two ways. First was online interview, which had 66 valid participants among 79 participants. Our online interviews were mainly

completed through the video function of instant messaging software such as QQ and WeChat. Regardless of regional differences, online interviews can greatly save communication costs. And since video interviews do not require a specific location, interviewees can be interviewed in a comfortable environment. In the process of our online interview, the problem mainly represented as the instability of the interview. On one hand, the quality of online interview is limited by the stability of the network connection. On the other hand, during the process of our interview, some participants were interrupted by the surrounding and real affairs, which had affected the continuity of the interview logic and reduced the efficiency of the interview.

In addition, fact-to-face interviews were conducted to 29 participants and 24 valid interviews were got. Face-to-face interview were mainly applied to the interviewees we recruited in the real world, and some interviewees concentrated in the same cities. Compared with the online interview, face-to-face interview takes longer time and costs more, which is reflected in the decision of interview time and place and the cost of traveling to and from the interview place. However, in the early stage of the data collection, the process of our face-to-face interviews all went surprisingly well. Therefore, in the following stage of in-depth interview, we tried our best to adopt the form of face-to-face interview, as it provided us with better data despite the higher cost.

A central challenge in our interviews came from the identity of the researcher as an insider. Generally, the insider-researchers are those who choose to study a group to which they belong or belonged (Breen, 2007). Previous researchers (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002; Unluer, 2012) have identified the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research as an insider-researcher. As we mentioned earlier, advantages include a better understanding and interpretation of contextual culture. The knowledge of research background helps insider-researchers to understand the corresponding cultural symbols. They have similar experiences with the interviewees and have mutually inclusive values and knowledge on the issue, which helps them to collect effective data effectively. While the disadvantages are obvious that insider-researcher

has the possibility of potential bias during the process of interview. To address this issue, the researcher attempted to communicate with interviewees in the role of novices or individuals lacking knowledge, in order to encourage them to speak freely and openly. In addition, the researcher also regularly communicated with supervisors on data collection and analysis to minimize bias caused by personal experience.

The preparation of the interview guide was also an important step in this phase. Based on the research questions and literature on gift exchange, virtual gifting, hybrid reciprocity and online conflict, an initial topic guide was drafted that covered four broad areas: players' gaming histories and key memories; experiences of giving, receiving and refusing virtual gifts; encounters with unfairness, exploitation and conflict that relate to anti-gift and malicious reciprocity; and relationships with avatars, NPCs and the wider game world. These four areas were mapped directly onto the three research questions and the conceptual framework developed in Chapters 1 to 3. The first area was used to situate informants' biographies and to identify significant turning points in their engagement with MMORPGs. The second area was aligned with work on gift and gift exchange theory and focused on concrete episodes of giving, receiving, refusing and "forgetting" gifts. The third area drew on the emerging concepts of hybrid reciprocity, malicious reciprocity and anti-gift to guide questions about unfairness, opportunism, revenge and repair. The fourth area was informed by discussions of human–CGE relations and world agency, and prompted informants to talk about avatars, NPCs, game rules and commercial mechanisms as they experienced them in play.

Within each area, the guide contained a small number of simple, open-ended questions (for example, "Can you tell me about a time when a gift in the game really mattered to you?"), followed by flexible probes that picked up on the interviewee's own wording and examples. Insights from Phase 1 historical documentary and Phase 2 netnography were then used to refine the wording and ordering of these prompts, for instance by incorporating in-game expressions that players themselves used and by adding optional follow-up questions about specific practices such as "carrying", guild

welfare, marauding or interactions with particular NPCs and events. A concise version of this topic guide, showing the core open-ended prompts used in the interviews, is provided as an example in Appendix 3.

4.6.4. Data Collection and Analysis

We started conduction of our in-depth interviews three months after the beginning of our netnography, when we had got a general image of how the consumers act during their gaming process. Different from the netnographic brief interviews, in-depth interviews were mainly unstructured to ensure the flexibility and fluent in the interview process. At the beginning of each interview, a warming-up question invited participants to recall their first memories when they entered online games, which opened up narratives about important people, gifts, conflicts and turning points in their gaming lives. From the recalling we recognized the special people and events in their gaming life and continued to get more information focusing on these topics. Most interviews naturally turned to focus on the experiences, thoughts and feelings of participants towards their avatars, virtual possessions and social relationships with other players, while others were guided by relative interview questions. The raw data we collected through the in-depth interview are the audio records of the interview and the notes of researcher during the interview. These records were all transcribed in Chinese. After the interview, we made all the transcriptions as soon as possible. The transcripts combined with the interviewer's notes were the main content of our data analysis.

The data analysis of our research is conducted by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data. It is used in qualitative research and focuses on examining themes or patterns of meaning within data. Thematic analysis explores explicit and implicit meanings within the data collected (Gibbs, 2007). Our research follows Braun and Clarke (2012)'s six-phase approach to conduct thematic analysis on the data collected in in-depth interview:

- (1) familiarizing with the data
- (2) generating initial codes

- (3) searching for themes
- (4) reviewing potential themes
- (5) defining and naming themes
- (6) producing the report

--Braun and Clarke (2012, p.69)

Data analysis is often described as a consequential procedure to data collection in research. During the process of our data analysis, we went through from coding to come out with themes for several rounds. This initial stage of coding helped to develop a deeper understanding of the social behaviours and relationships towards the online player participants, as well as the usefulness of the data in light of the research objectives. This was followed by further stage of coding and recoding before the final themes were concluded. Each theme consists of several categories, and different categories conclude various salient codes among the collected data. Our thematic analysis has taken an inductive way, in which the themes identified are strongly linked to the data. Based on the unstructured interview, inductive thematic analysis can better reflect the content of data.

In practical terms, familiarization involved repeated reading of the Chinese transcripts alongside the interviewer's notes, with early memo-writing focusing on concrete episodes of gifting, hybrid exchanges, anti-gift incidents and interactions with non-human entities. Initial codes were then generated at a relatively descriptive level (for example, "being carried through a dungeon", "losing gear after PK", "feeding a favourite NPC", "using cash to buy gifts"), before being progressively grouped into more abstract themes such as virtual gifts, hybrid reciprocity, anti-gift and human-CGE exchanges. A simple example illustrates this process: a narrative in which a participant described being repeatedly killed and looted by a rival guild, then later joining friends to hunt them down, was initially coded as "PK loss", "humiliation", "calling friends for help" and "guild revenge". These codes were subsequently integrated into a broader theme of malicious reciprocity and anti-gift, which connects to the theoretical

discussion in later chapters.

Throughout the analysis, themes emerging from interview data were compared with insights from Phase 1 historical documentary and Phase 2 netnography. This cross-phase comparison helped to distinguish long-standing patterns from more recent developments, and to check whether interpretations of interviews were consistent with observed practices and archived traces in the wider MMORPG environment. Appendix 4 provides an illustrative extract from the coding index that summarizes how selected Chinese in-game expressions and their English codes are grouped into final themes and linked to their main empirical sources.

4.7. Ethic Consideration

4.7.1. Historical Documentary

Using pre-existing documents as a form of data also raises fewer ethical concerns than using other qualitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Public records are available for anyone to examine and are often anonymous. Authors of books and articles appearing in newspapers and journals are generally aware that anyone will be able to read their content. This awareness usually reduces the ethical concerns associated with using public documents. When questions related to ethics arise, researchers need to ask themselves whether those who produced a document intended it to be public or private (Hookway, 2008). When making ethical decisions regarding the use of online content, researchers need to remember that the greater the chance the content is considered public, the less need there is to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the individuals who created it. Researchers need to be cautious with materials not intended for public use. They need to consider issues involving anonymity, consent, and vulnerability. Content posted by children and other vulnerable groups needs to be treated with care. Members of these groups might not realize the risks associated with posting content on the Internet. Researchers need to ask themselves if the authors of the content to be analyzed will be harmed by their research (Braun & Clarke 2013).

To ensure ethical rigour, the documents reviewed in this research were all from

public sources, including text and video websites. Although the Internet's personal posts resource does not require special authorization for non-commercial purposes, in order to comply with research ethics we still sought consent from the authors of online documents whenever they could be identified and contacted. For some old public documents, in view of the authorization agreement between the author and the websites at that time, we obtained the permission to use the relevant documents through the website operators, and ensured the privacy of the authors. In all cases, potentially identifying information was avoided or removed when it was not essential for understanding the historical development of virtual worlds.

4.7.2. Netnography

Ethical consideration is a very important element in conducting netnography. In social science research that involves with human subjects, there is the potential for harm to come to those subjects. Marketing researchers desiring to use netnography as a method are obliged to consider and follow ethical guidelines. The boundary between public and private is blurred on the Internet. Despite that the Internet seems to be a public environment, research involving online communities does not simply assume that its participants automatically consent to the presence and conduct of research. As Kozinets (2002) points out, two fundamental ethical concerns are the publicity or privacy of online forums, and the extent to which participation in online spaces can be understood as 'informed consent' in cyberspace (Kozinets, 2002).

Overall, our study followed the netnography ethic procedures proposed by Kozinets (2002, 2015):

- “(1) The researcher should fully disclose his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members during any research;
- (2) the researchers should ensure confidentiality and anonymity to informants;
- (3) the researcher should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the online community being researched.
- (4) The researcher should take a cautious position on the private-versus-public medium issue.”

--Kozinets (2002, p.65)

For online communities of tribes and guilds, we first obtained the consent of the leaders before launching observation, and the leaders informed all the other members with the power in the game, so as to identify the researchers. Meanwhile, to ensure that active members and new members were informed during the study period, the researchers' greeting information was constantly posted on the in-game guild announcement and the out-of-game online group announcement. All of our netnography interviews have been conducted in advance with the consent of the interviewees, and we ensure confidentiality and anonymity policy applies in this case. User IDs and guild names were anonymized or disguised in fieldnotes and in the thesis, unless they referred to publicly known institutional entities rather than individual players.

4.7.3. Interview

During the recruitment process, we ensured that potential participants were clearly aware of the researcher identity of the interviewer and the research nature of the interview. On this basis, participants were informed about the conditions of confidentiality and about the limited circumstances under which confidentiality would need to be breached, for example in cases of serious risk of harm. The consent of the interviewees who participated in the online interview would be recorded in the audio record before the formal interview, and the face-to-face interview participants all gave their written and verbal consent to the interview.

All the participants were told that the interview would be recorded by audio. They were told that sensitive issues involving personal privacy might arise during the interview, and they were given the right to interrupt and withdraw from the interview at any time. The data were only sorted and used by the researcher, and would be only used for academic purposes. All data were closely stored and backed up.

In the transcription pseudo names were assigned to participants and any personal information that might reveal their identity have been made anonymous as far as is

possible and consistent with the needs of the study. These procedures ensured that interview data could be linked to broader themes about virtual gifts, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift in MMORPGs without exposing individual players to unnecessary risk.

4.8. Conclusion

This chapter presents the philosophical and methodological design of our research. First, it has outlined the interpretivist philosophical position of the study, together with its ontological and epistemological assumptions. The interpretivism philosophy along with the related assumptions of ontology and epistemology are chosen. On this basis, and in line with the focus on players' own meanings around virtual gifts, hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift, the research follows an inductive research logic, adopts a qualitative approach and employs an ethnographic orientation. A triangulation of qualitative methods with three phases, historical documentary, netnography and in-depth interview, is taken in this study in order to capture both the long-term evolution of online game cultures and the contemporary practices of players in MMORPGs. Phase 1 reviewed the historical records on online websites of posts, blogs, documents and videos. We have tried to reach the early process of Chinese online games and used this part of data as the complementary from a developing perspective.

Phase 2 is treated as the primary empirical basis of the research. Following Kozinets (2002; 2015)'s work, we have dived into 10 guilds in the Chinese online game products *JX3* and *FF14*, collecting data by direct participations, observations and brief interviews in the gaming world and the related online communities. This phase allows close observation of how gifts, hybrid exchanges and anti-gift practices are enacted and negotiated in everyday play. Phase 3 is another main method of our study. We have taken interviews with 85 participants recruited from online game communities, online forums and offline. The participants share different patterns of gaming engagement and experience, thus ensuring the diversity of data collected. These interviews provide space for participants to reflect on their experiences of gifting, conflict and their relationships with avatars, NPCs and the "world", complementing the observational

material gathered in Phase 2 and the historical perspective developed in Phase 1.

The data collected in our study are analyzed by a thematic way. Across all three phases, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-step framework, moving from familiarisation and initial coding to the development, review and naming of themes. Emerging findings are coming into different themes and will be given in the following chapters. Themes generated from documentary, netnographic and interview data were compared and integrated, which enabled the study to connect historical change with contemporary practices and to configure the actor-networks of human and non-human participants involved in virtual gifting and anti-gifting. The findings from the used research methods are presented in the following Chapter 5 to 7 according to the research phases. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings of Phase 1, focusing on the original gifts and market in online games. Chapter 6 followed will respectively discuss the positive virtual gift and "anti-gift", and Chapter 7 provides the discussion of the co-exist and co-effect of the two forms of gifting. A comprehensive discussion of findings, and their implications for gift exchange theory and the actor-network configuration of human and computer-generated entities in MMORPGs, will be given in Chapter 8.

5. PHASE I: HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF ONLINE GIFT

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the first research phase that are derived from historical documentary materials on early Chinese online games. The findings of Phase 1 mainly focus on how the original online gift in Chinese MMORPGs have emerged and developed. Gift exchange in online games originated in online Strategy-oriented Role-Play Game (SRPG), an early form of MMORPG. Facilitated by the content of Player vs Environment (PVE) game mechanics, gift exchange has become an important social practice. While some of the content has been phased out with product updates, these early mechanics nevertheless laid the foundation and gave the online gift a specific advantage to thrive in the virtual world. Recent research on social gaming and MMORPGs highlights that contemporary online games operate as social spaces where reciprocity, cooperation and shared play are central to players' well-being and continued participation (Gonçalves, Sousa, & Nisi, 2023; Kim, 2025; Sachan, Chhabra, & Abraham, 2025; Wu & Chang, 2025). However, this work usually focuses on current MMORPG ecosystems and rarely traces how gifting practices historically emerged from earlier online role-playing games. Phase 1 therefore turns to the pre-MMORPG era to map the historical roots of virtual gifting that underpin later forms of hybrid reciprocity, dark gifting and anti-gift explored in subsequent chapters.

Beside the generalized exchange, the balanced market exchange has also taken place during the developing of MMORPG. The exchange system of gift and market has been considered independent (Cheal, 2015). Previous literature has frequently contrasted gift exchange with commodity exchange and mentioned the mutual substitution of each other (e.g., Marcoux, 2009; Gregory, 2016). However, during the developing of virtual world in online games, the two streams have presented a parallel status and showed possible interweaving. Historical records suggest that early virtual economies allowed

gifts and market transactions to circulate through the same interfaces and objects, and that players routinely blurred the distinction between “pure” gifting and commercial trade. This chapter therefore uses Phase 1 materials to show how early online games already combined gift exchange with market logics within the same actor-network, rather than treating them as strictly opposed spheres.

In addition, in online Action-oriented Role-play Games (ARPG), another predecessor of MMORPG, the game style of Player vs Player (PVP) has also attracted our attention. While PVP in previous online games traditionally centered on conflicts and struggles, it showed potential as a new method of socializing, thus providing a possible direction of further research. From the perspective of this thesis, the ways in which conflict, looting and retaliation were structured in early ARPGs provide an important historical backdrop for later discussions of dark gifting, anti-gift practices and malicious reciprocity in MMORPGs.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first section focuses on the original online gift in SRPG. As the social practice shifted from the real world, gift exchange has gradually been accepted and recognized among players under the promotion of SRPG. In the next section, the development of the online game market has also been concerned. Within the virtual world, players establish free trade markets based on the game’s commercial system. It makes up the exchange system together with gift in the virtual world, and the commodity attribute as well as the profit mode of online game product make it possible for the mutual penetration. In the last section, special attention would be given to PVP content in ARPG, which may raise a potential method of socializing under a lawless environment. Taken together, these sections demonstrate how early online gifts, internal and external markets, and PVP-based interactions preconfigure the virtual gifting and anti-gifting practices that later become central to MMORPG social life.

5.2. Original gift exchange in online games

5.2.1. Online Strategy-oriented Role-Play Game and initial social behaviour

Previous literature regarding online society has predominantly utilized MMORPG products like *World of Warcraft* as the research context (e.g., Nardi & Harris, 2006; Bessière & Kisler, 2007; Belk, 2014). However, the genesis of online gaming culture can be traced back to the Early Online Role-Playing Game (ORPG) era. Although modern-day consumers may view these early ORPGs as crude in comparison to today's technologically advanced virtual world, they had already established the foundational elements of contemporary online society. Within this nascent social environment, netizens spontaneously interacted with one another, engaging in social activities and constructing social relationships within the virtual world while simultaneously participating in gameplay. These activities served as prototypes for current social behaviors within virtual worlds, exhibiting characteristics of present-day behavioral



Figure 7 Interface of ORPG “*Crossgate*” and single RPG “*Xianjian 1*”

Source: Images from introductory game materials on 17173.com (cg.17173.com).

patterns. As the network society continues to progress, consumers' behavioral patterns have become increasingly fully developed and mature. ORPGs have thus emerged as a focal point for scholars in exploring the archetypes of consumer behavior in contemporary MMORPGs and the evolution of these behavior patterns. Recent reviews

of social gaming and MMO communities implicitly build on this infrastructural shift, treating massively multiplayer titles as social laboratories that extend dynamics first visible in these early ORPG worlds (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Choi & Williams, 2025).

During the early stages of ORPGs, the predominant game type was Strategy-Oriented Role-Playing Games (De Freitas & Griffiths, 2007). This was due to the fact that early ORPGs were typically an online shift from offline single-player RPGs, and thus replicated much of the interface and gameplay mechanics of their offline counterparts. Figure 7 depicts a comparison between the interface of early ORPGs and single-player RPGs. Similarly, both types of games utilized a third-person top-down perspective. In terms of gameplay mechanics, players controlled their avatars to move around the game world and could interact with nearby NPCs and objects. The fundamental elements of RPG games, including characters, controls, and perspective, were present in both types of games (Dicky, 2007). In terms of game content, the linear narrative exploration of single-player RPGs was adopted as the background story and plot content of ORPGs. However, in contrast to completing the plot, players were more incentivized to control their avatars to gain Experience Points (EXPs) and increase their Levels. This process was referred to as Magic Find (MF), which involved defeating enemies and finding treasures. As players' avatar levels increased, they were able to explore more game content and acquire more treasure. The MF process corresponds to the core gameplay mechanic of RPGs, namely, character growth. However, the plot, which was a supporting gameplay mechanic in RPGs, was weakened in ORPGs and was replaced with a socially interactive system based on the internet. This allowed players to “grow” together with other players from different locations and engage in social interactions during the process. *Humor Prophet*, a well-known Chinese player as well as video uploader, described in his works of “Old Game Series” as follows:

“Why were old online games fun? Because back then, playing games was our sole focus. Even for single player games, if you didn't level up or couldn't defeat the boss, the plot wouldn't move forward. Online games were no different. Nowadays, if you

were asked to play an online game where you had to continuously level up all day, you would definitely find it unbearable. But back then, it was enjoyable, even more so than single player games, because even during the most mundane moments, you were never alone. As the saying goes, ‘no brothers, no online games’, whether they were friends you knew in real life or friends you met online, playing games with a group of people was always more interesting than playing alone.”



Figure 8 Combat scene in turn-based online games

Source: Image from introductory game materials on 17173.com (cg.17173.com).

In the documentary on early online games, many players expressed views similar to that of this uploader. In early ORPGs, the social content within the games served as the primary incentive, thus the game system attempted to promote social interaction between players. Using the core mechanism of MF, SRPGs adopted a “landmine-style” trigger for combat, which was randomly triggered from encounters and separated into specific scenes. In the combat scene (as shown in Figure 8), avatars and a variable number of enemy non-playable characters (NPCs) took turns to act, including attacking,

defending, and using skills. Thus, early SRPGs were referred to as “turn-based online games”. *Humor Prophet* also shared his experience with an early online SRPG product *Crossgate* as follows:

“Turn-based online games refer to online role-playing games (ORPGs) that adopt a turn-based mechanism. They bear close resemblance to the original single-player games that were played on PCs, where players-controlled characters to level up and immerse themselves in the storyline alone. However, playing online SRPGs alone often leads to a difficult and perilous experience. Unlike modern MMORPGs, SRPGs did not offer experience point rewards for completing missions, making combat the only means of leveling up. Upon entering battle, players could only control their avatar and pet, up to two units, while the number of enemies was unknown. The enemy count could vary from one or two opponents to a full team of adversaries, making a 2-vs-10 fight a reality, rendering solo play impossible. As a result, players often formed teams before initiating magic find (MF) battles to increase their chances of success. This was also the beginning of forming new social connections within the game world.”

The descriptions provided a comprehensive view of the combat system in turn-based online games of the past, while also highlighting the impact of the combat system on players. Enemies in turn-based online games were often of varying difficulty, with some requiring higher levels and skills to overcome. Therefore, players needed to constantly level up and improve their equipment to better face these enemies. As a result, teaming up to fight monsters became a necessary path for character growth. Additionally, even in the same map, there were varying difficulty levels of enemies that could drop game items, virtual currency, skill points, or increased experience points as rewards. Since these rewards could help players level up and improve their skills, players often preferred to team up to face stronger enemies in order to achieve higher efficiency in monster farming. In this process, team cooperation among players was considered to be not only encouraged, but even enforced by the combat system. From today's perspective, overly difficult MF design is generally considered to be a flaw in

game design. However, in early online games, this design inadvertently promoted the establishment and maintenance of social relations among strangers. Such design not only strengthened interaction and socialization among players, but also increased the fun and challenge of the game. Through teaming up, players could better collaborate, support each other, and jointly complete tasks and instances in the game.

Furthermore, as team cooperation in turn-based online games required better strategic planning and negotiation among players, it enhanced the team spirit and tacit understanding among players. Turn-based combat in online games was a more strategic and complex approach to battles. Each player was required to select appropriate actions within their turn and wait for other players to act, until the end of the turn. This type of combat forfeited the realism of real-time battles, instead evolving into a decision-based tactical and strategic process. This unreality created tactical possibilities. Despite the loss of immersion in the game's reality, players considered it worthwhile for the satisfaction gained from developing tactics and executing them successfully. Due to the unique nature of turn-based combat in online games, players had to cooperate and communicate more closely to ensure that their actions were smoother and more effective. In the game, players needed to study and master their opponents' combat skills and actions while taking into account the impact of their own actions on future battles. This complexity and strategic approach could promote frequent communication between players, making it easier for them to establish connections and promote social interaction. During turn-based combat in online games, players often discussed and exchanged ideas on how to respond to opponents' actions, organize better defenses and attacks, and make the most of their individual strengths.

The process of fighting side by side in online games also promoted communication and social interaction among players. As they worked together to complete missions and dungeons, players supported and collaborated with each other to face battles and challenges. This cooperation and interaction brought players closer and fostered trust, allowing strangers to get to know each other and become good friends in the game.

Additionally, players exchanged game experiences, stories, and humor with each other, further increasing interactivity and socialization. As described by *Humor Prophet*, the battle and social systems of SRPG complemented each other. The relevant design of MF allowed players to form friendships with strangers in the virtual world, which in turn allowed them to continue their adventure in the fantasy world with their online/offline friends. From a gift-exchange perspective, these enforced cooperative encounters already created dense situations of obligation, gratitude, and shared risk that later underpin the more elaborate circuits of virtual gifting traced in the subsequent sections (Mauss, 1925/1990; Sahlins, 1972).

5.2.2. Early online gift in virtual society

As a result of the promotion and encouragement of social behavior in early online games, social interaction between players became increasingly frequent. Online gift exchange emerged as a notable social behavior model in online games. Initially, online gift exchange originated from the spontaneous help given by players during their adventures. In the process of playing MF, novice players often found themselves at a disadvantage due to their relatively low levels and limited supplies, which put them in danger. When they formed impromptu teams with other players, they tended to provide supplies and equipment to ensure their survival. Looking back on their early gaming experiences, players often reminisce about these “initial gifts” as life-savers. These seemingly mundane interventions illustrate how generalized reciprocity can emerge among strangers who share only a transient encounter in a risky environment, rather than among kin or close ties.

It is worth noting that in the context of SRPG, online gift exchange typically occurs between strangers. Previous literature has typically described generalized gift exchange as occurring between family members or relatives (e.g., Sherry, 1983; Belk, 1993; Joy, 2001), and gift-giving practices between strangers are generally not significant. However, in early online games, online gift exchange was common among temporary teams formed in social contexts with strangers. These gifts brought players closer to

their temporary teammates, creating a sense of intimacy. Accompanied by gift-giving, initial social relationships were built between givers and receivers through mutually adding each other to their “friend list” in the game. As a result, the gift became imbued with social significance and was increasingly used as a means of seeking and reinforcing relationships. Subsequent MMO studies show similar patterns in larger-scale environments, where small acts of assistance and gifting foster durable social capital, reciprocity, and well-being for player groups (Bisberg et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Kim, 2025).

Furthermore, SRPG's game mechanism expanded the expression of gifts, as different resources have been transformed into gifts. As previously described, the process of MF is not only a process of character leveling and growth, but also a process of possession accumulation for players. During MF, players not only gain experience points but also virtual currency and virtual items dropped by monsters. These items became the first bucket of gold for players in the virtual world, which allowed them to lend a helping hand to others in times of need. Additionally, online gifts are frequently context-bound, and propriety canons are tailored to specific situations (Sherry, 1983). In the specific context of virtual worlds, players can obtain raw materials from “nature” by mastering certain collection and production skills and turning them into weapons and armors. In addition to necessary self-use, these game props made by players also became gifts to others. A blog in the Crossgate Community records a story as follows:

“I was one of the first full-life class players on our server, and it took me a long time to train my production class characters. I've never been bored about spending long hours on production work... It seems that I am like Doraemon when I give my self-made equipment to my friends. Usually, they are very happy to receive new weapons and armor, and it is also very rewarding for me to see them wear the gear I made by myself... They would also help me with some hard work and give me the rare materials dropped during MF in return.”

According to the record, players who are enthusiastic about production give special

value to the items they create through their efforts. These gifts are often considered to have special symbolic meaning by recipients and are valued for their social significance beyond their usefulness as game props. Through the act of giving, both givers and recipients experience emotional satisfaction and reinforce existing social relationships. At the same time, the process of gift-giving and return also reflects reciprocity in the virtual world. The recorder gives finished equipment to their friends, who use the equipment to enhance themselves, enabling them to engage in higher difficulty MF and obtain higher-level crafting materials to return to the original recorder. It is a process in which the exchanged gifts are consumed by actants, during which the flow of objects allows both giver and recipient to benefit, reflecting a typical form of generalized reciprocity, or putatively altruistic transactions (Sahlins, 1972). This form of reciprocity stresses the obligation of reciprocity, with neither party placing real-time responses as requirements or expectations.

Taking a broader perspective, the “consumable” and “non-binding” properties of virtual items in SRPGs have indirectly contributed to the circulation of gifts within the community. Chapter 2 mentions that virtual items in MMORPGs are “bound” and become bound to the avatar when obtained or used, though early online game items did not have a character-binding mechanism. During the process of transfer and use, their utility value was consumed. For example, gear has “durability,” which decreases with use until it reaches zero, rendering the item “damaged” and permanently disappearing from inventory. This makes virtual game items, including consumable items (potions, food) and long-term items (weapons, armor), purely consumable goods. However, when these consumables become gifts, players usually do not allow them to be damaged and lost. Although gifts are often used and consumed with each giving, when durability cannot be restored, and there is only one use left, players tend to keep these items as souvenirs. The famous “don’t lose the fish” incident in the history of online gaming describes such a story(Figure 9):

“A novice player coincidentally received a giving from a small gnome character,

including some gold coins, some items, and 'a 22-pound fish.' The novice player was surprised and only received a chat message, 'Take this as a gift. Don't lose the fish.' Can you imagine the excitement and thrill that the gnome player felt when he caught this fish? Such fish are only found in low-level waters, and 22 pounds is quite heavy for this kind of fish. He probably was leaving the world and decided to give away his belongings - including the fish that brought him joy - to a stranger. We don't know why he was leaving, but the phrase 'don't lose the fish' shows his deep attachment to the game. He hoped that the excitement and thrill he experienced at the beginning would stay with someone else, remaining in the game."



Figure 9 Screenshot of the incident "Don't lose the fish"

Source: Image from a news report on Sohu.com.

This incident was initially posted on the National Geographiy of Azeroth Forum(NGA). According to the narrators and responders in the forum, this incident, along with other similar events, emphasizes the value and significance of gift-giving in the vast gaming community. Similar to Mauss' (1925) description of the Kula Ring, the social integration within the community is achieved through gift-giving. Each recipient of the gift, who later becomes the giver, feels the emotional and social value contained in the gift while it is being consumed. Players empathize with the initial gift exchange, and pass on this spirit in every subsequent gift exchange.



Figure 10 An example of gift exchange that was marked as one-sided exchange

Source: Product listing image from Taobao (world.taobao.com).

It is worth noting that, as shown in Figure 9, due to the early network games' exchanges being implemented through the “trade” function in the game, exchange behaviors are often represented in a unified form of balance. In our documentary works, many past generalized exchanges have been recorded as balance exchanges or one-

sided exchanges (Figure 10). Although the exchange form is unified, there are actual differences in the nature of the exchange. This also blurs the boundary between gift exchange and balanced exchange on the surface, magnifying the social value contained in online gifts, while commercial value is often overlooked. As mentioned earlier, gifts as purely consumable goods are accompanied by durability consumption during the transfer process. This does indeed weaken the commercial value of gifts. However, this is often not a concern for players during the gift-giving process. Players are more concerned about the bond value contained in the item, which is not eliminated as the gift is passed on. This makes gift exchange in SRPG a “hybrid exchange”. It has the form of commercial trade but contains the essence of generalized exchange. It also allows gift exchange in early online games to coexist and parallel the market, becoming a social system that plays a common role in the virtual world. In later chapters this ambivalent status of virtual items as both consumables and mnemonic tokens becomes central to the analysis of hybrid reciprocity, dark gifting, and anti-gift practices.

5.2.3. The “Update Paradox” and deoptimization of socialization

Since the landing and popularization of ORPG in the Chinese market, game designers have been continuously updating game content and gameplay. As mentioned earlier, there were many design flaws and even loopholes in early ORPGs. Although players at the time accepted and recognized these mechanisms and enjoyed playing with them, as similar competitive products emerged, some legacy issues became obstacles to new players entering the game. Therefore, in subsequent game products and updates, some old mechanisms have gradually been eliminated and replaced with new ones. However, in reviewing past records, I find that some updated mechanisms have had negative effects. These changes can be seen as the agency of the game system, and have directly or indirectly changed social behavior in online games and affected social cohesion. In this paper, these updates are referred as the “update paradox,” meaning that positive updates have had a counterproductive effect. With the launch of the classic MMORPG *World of Warcraft* in 2005, MMORPGs officially entered the historical stage and became a popular genre in online gaming, and early ORPGs began the transition to

MMORPGs (as shown in Section 4.4.2). In this process, some mechanisms with update paradoxes have also been used in MMORPGs and have affected subsequent social behavior models. The following sections examine the development process of these updates and expound on their effects.



Figure 11 Scene of "Player Hospital" in Crossgate

Source: Image from a discussion thread on Gamer.com.tw (Bahamut).

As an important part of online games, the chat system is directly related to social interaction and has become the main interactive feature of the social aspect of online games (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004). In the past, the chat system in online games was simulated to reflect real-life situations. Non-teammate player characters' speech could only be received by other players within a specific distance (Waskul, 2003). Face-to-face communication between player characters in the virtual world made specific scenes in the game a popular gathering place for players (Figure 11). In addition, players could add each other as friends through ritual behavior of specific gift exchange

in the game, and have long-distance conversations through friend messages. However, in subsequent ORPGs, in order to facilitate communication between players, this system was replaced by an in-game whisper system, where players could talk to each other regardless of distance by specifying the name of the other player without a friend adding. Correspondingly, adding friends also became a simple click operation, no longer requiring a cumbersome face-to-face gift exchange ritual. Although this functional change greatly reduced communication barriers between players, it caused the game to lose some of the social interactions among them.

Furthermore, the update paradox in the chat system also involves the emergence of the world channel. As part of the in-game social interaction, the world channel provides a platform for players to broadcast and communicate with each other globally, making it easier for players to meet other players and promoting social interaction. Additionally, the world channel allows players to find teammates globally, facilitating player grouping and collaboration and improving the game's cooperation and teamwork. Through the world channel, players can quickly obtain dynamic information about the game, understanding the latest developments and changes. However, in previous games, the world channel has been flooded with spam and inappropriate content. These negative messages occupy the player's social window, affecting the virtual world gaming experience. If the world channel is not effectively managed and regulated, it may lead to social instability within the game community. Previous literature suggests that the problem with the world channel is that it breaks the utopian-style second life of the virtual world. For example, Wei and Lu (2014) argue that online games help individuals escape or relieve negative mood states such as boredom and stress, reinforce positive mood states such as excitement and happiness (Wei and Lu, 2014), and enable users to experience increased pleasure and arousal (Bae et al., 2016; Li et al., 2018). With the emergence of a universal chat channel, the sense of immersion in the virtual world is broken, reminding players that they are participating in a game (Kim et al., 2016). Contemporary work on online sociality similarly highlights how apparently

minor interface or channel changes can recalibrate players' sense of togetherness, escape, and community, underlining that communication tools are not neutral but actively shape social outcomes in multiplayer worlds (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Choi & Williams, 2025).

The paradox of game system updates is regarded as an issue of agency from game system, while similar paradoxes exist in game operations, where updates are seen as interventions by game developers in the game system. One notable example is the changes in billing models for online games. The combination of hourly billing by hourly card and monthly payment by monthly card, promoted by early netizens, became the standard charging mode for most online games. The success of "The Legend of Mir" pushed this model to the extreme, as it opened up sales channels for game cards and made it possible for players to purchase game cards from internet bars, newsstands, software sellers, or even roadside vendors. However, some early ORPGs began to modify their billing models in 2005, introducing a virtual item shop set up within the game by the game developers, where players could exchange game-specific virtual currencies purchased with real money for items on the shop (Zhang & Li, 2006). The introduction of the virtual item shop not only caused great dissatisfaction among player groups, but also provoked reactions from various sectors. Previous research has suggested that games that advertise as free but charge for virtual items are a major factor in the development of game addiction among players. This is because point card systems are based on balanced development, and do not have virtual item shops. All items are acquired through players' own efforts. In contrast, the virtual item shop is based on the use of real money to purchase powerful enhancement items, which often elicit pleasure that players cannot resist, leading to deeper addiction (Nojima, 2007).

Simultaneously, reforms in game operations have disrupted the balance between gift systems and market economies in virtual worlds. The influx of paid virtual items has greatly impacted consumers' perceptions of virtual goods and the market ecology of online gaming. The billing method for item charges, which has been widely adopted by

online game manufacturers in China, has become the dominant billing model in the market (Budak & Özen, 2022). Its influence on virtual item exchange continues to affect MMORPGs and other types of online games (further discussed in Chapter 6). Recent research on virtual currencies and game economies reinforces this point, demonstrating how monetization choices and virtual money infrastructures reshape players' perceptions of fairness, usefulness, and value in online environments (Gawron & Strzelecki, 2021; Vvedenskaya, 2022). The next section focuses on the development of the online gaming market and elaborate on the relationship between market economies and gift economies in early online games from the perspective of the market.

5.3. Evolution of online game market

5.3.1. Internal market in virtual world

The core mechanism of MF brought about early wealth accumulation for players. As players accumulated surplus virtual items, they chose to exchange them with other players for mutual benefit. These exchanges are considered “commercial” as they typically involve immediate, equivalent exchanges without the temporal and spatial delay of gift exchanges. Historical records show that this form of barter exchange, where players traded their possessions with others for virtual items without using currency, was quite similar to business development in the real world (Davies, 2010). As this exchange behavior developed, the result was the emergence of early online game exchange markets as a result of community members' collective wealth accumulation. Section 5.2.3 mentioned that the limitations of early chat systems' communication areas caused players to gather in certain regions. For early players who seek the chances of trades, the market in the game was where they gather and post trade information. For example, Figure 12 shows the “East Gate Trading Market,” which was spontaneously formed by players and became an unwritten practice in *Crossgate*. Players who need to engage in item trading and advertise their wares always voluntarily proceeded to the designated area and chose a location to set up a “stall.” Seen from today's perspective, these improvised “street markets” already operated as small-scale

virtual economies, long before game currencies and auction houses were explicitly theorised as electronic markets in later work on online games.

In contrast to real-world business development, virtual currency is a well-established game system in online games. However, for a long time, virtual currency was primarily used as an interactive currency between players and non-playable characters (NPCs) and did not participate in commercial exchanges between players. The main reason for this was the uncertainty surrounding the value of virtual goods used in trades at the time. Selling these items to NPCs often resulted in a virtual currency price vastly lower than their actual worth, creating a loophole in early game design that inadvertently reduced players' willingness to bargain for their own interests as trading parties. As the value of game items provided by trading parties was often difficult to balance absolutely or even difficult to quantify, players were less concerned with "fairness" and more concerned with not being at a disadvantage. This situation was humorously referred to as "no-lose trading" in past records, with the expression conveying players' broad-mindedness towards temporary gains or losses. The lack of uniformity in item pricing also resulted in commodity exchanges in original online games (especially the products of pre-MMORPGs) being not purely balanced exchanges, but rather roughly balanced exchanges. Later studies on in-game e-currencies show how these informal practices gradually stabilized into more systematic virtual markets in which players learned to evaluate usefulness, convenience and risk when adopting currencies for peer-to-peer trade (Gawron & Strzelecki, 2021).



Figure 12 the “East Gate Trading Market” in Crossgate

Source: Image from Crossgate-related materials on hyemoli.com.

Another reason of the emerging roughly balanced exchanges in early online games was the players' empathy towards trading partners. Players' game characters could assume different roles by mastering various skills. In different transactions, they might act as gatherers of raw materials, producers of in-game equipment, or users of produced equipment. Players' constant switching between the roles of producers, traders, and consumers allowed them to reach mutual understanding from different standpoints. This is referred to as the “renqing” factor in social interaction, which is also interpreted as the “human relations and social complexities” in traditional Chinese culture. Previous research has focused on interpreting this social factor in business. For example, Wang et al. (2008) indicate the mediating role and significance of “renqing” for enhancing trust and contributing towards the long-term stability in relational exchange. Yen et al. (2011) proposed a measurement model for social relations based on three Chinese relational constructs - ganqing, renqing, and xinren. In ORPGs where social

interaction is the primary game content, when commodity transactions are imbued with the “renqing” factor, the pursuit of trading parties shifts from balance and profit maximization to a mixed “semi-sale, semi-gift” exchange mode that blends balance and generalized exchange. This exchange mode challenges Sahlins' (1972) argument that balance reciprocity does not constitute long-term social relationships. Through single or multiple transactions and communications, the players of the buying and selling parties can establish social relationships with each other. This social model undoubtedly strengthens the social cohesion of the entire community business circle, making the market a component of the social network.

Meanwhile, this impure commercial exchange also supports the previous point that the boundary between commodity exchange and gift exchange in early ORPGs is blurred. In Section 5.2.2, we have already explained the dual nature of the “transaction-exchange” in gift exchange in online games. Gift exchange is expressed in the form of balance/one-sided trade, thus blurring the boundary between gift and market exchange. From the perspective of the internal market, commercial exchange in early online games also had a human relations factor and was a mixed transaction of “semi-sale, semi-gift”. Although previous research has viewed gift economy and market economy as two opposing poles (e.g., Marcoux, 2009; Gregory, 2016), the boundary between gift exchange and commodity exchange in online games is not clear-cut. As a way for players to accumulate in-game wealth, commodity exchange and gift exchange together constitute the system of commodity circulation in the game, and to some extent, they achieve coexistence and serve as a means of social cohesion and integration in the online game community.

5.3.2. External market and contaminated “Utopia”

Within the virtual world of online games, the coexistence and co-effect of the early gift economy and market economy closely connected players in the online community. This is also why players today still reminisce about the game environment and believe that it constituted a “utopia”. As described in many records of reminiscences about the

past:

“In an idealized country, players experience their second life. With their own continuous growth, they are self-sufficient while also able to share with others. Efforts always bring rewards. The road of adventure is never lonely, because there are always like-minded friends from all over the world who accompany you through this journey.”

Perhaps because the beautiful memories of the past have embellished negative memories, players seem to have ignored the fact that online game products themselves belong to the online game market. Players in the virtual world often do not care that they need to pay to play the online games, or selectively ignore this fact, and still treat others generously in the virtual world, giving up the pursuit of fame and fortune. When examining the relationship between the online community and the real society outside the virtual world, players' behavior gives new cross-border meanings to gift economy and market economy. To some extent, the gift economy in online games also coexists with the external real market.

Nonetheless, along with the changes in the gaming environment and updates to game operation, the relationship between gift and market has also undergone transformations. As mentioned in Section 5.2.3, the charging model in early ORPGs shifted from time-based charging to prop-based charging. For the development of the online social environment and market, the far-reaching impact of the prop-based charging model lies in its awakening of players' awareness of the nature of online game commodities and the direct establishment of a connection between real currency and virtual world content. Players can purchase in-game props with real currency, which not only affects game fairness but also triggers a transformation in consumers' perception of game props (Zhang & Li, 2006). Subsequent legal and policy work shows how these links between real money and virtual items have made game economies visible as objects of taxation, regulation and legal dispute, further undermining the idea that they are merely playful “second lives” detached from serious economic concerns (Vvedenskaya, 2022). Consumers' cognition of virtual items affects their consumption choices. Despite

consumers in early ORPGs were more neutral or even resistant to buying game items in online games, whether from game stores or from other people (Jin et al., 2017), modern online games have a large number of loyal users who are willing to purchase game items, and the switch of choices were mainly caused by the change of charging mode. In his blog, a veteran player named John describes a shift in his attitude towards gaming:

“Most of my money invested on games are used to buy equipment, or buy virtual items in the game. If I want to play an online game comfortably, either money or time are needed. When I was in college, I had little money but plenty of time, so I would spend more time playing games. Now I am at work and have many affairs to do every day. If I continue to spend most of my spare time in the game, it is equal to a cost of my health, then the game is not an entertainment but another job for me. That’s also why I don’t like to participate in regular PVE activities. ...For example, if I spend time instead of money on acquiring equipment, the money I save is worth the time I spend, right? But I’m sure I’ll make more money for the same amount of time than I save. As a result, it must be more appropriate to spend money rather than time for me.”

John’s account highlights a shift in consumption preferences resulting from changes in the charging model. As service providers’ charging models evolve, players are increasingly weighing the benefits of investing their time to obtain virtual items or spending money to acquire them directly. His example exemplifies that consumers often allocate fewer resources to achieve greater benefits in online games, opting to invest the richer resources at their disposal, be it time or money. This challenges Lehdonvirta’s (2009) viewpoint that virtual goods must predominantly be obtained through labor, leading to a “time aristocracy” rather than a “money aristocracy”. The narrative also foreshadows contemporary research that treats game worlds as sites where labour, time and money are routinely converted into one another through virtual markets and e-currencies rather than as purely ludic spaces (Gawron & Strzelecki, 2021).

The introduction of open access to virtual items has led to the emergence of Real Money Trading (RMT), a concept that refers to the practice of players using actual currency to purchase virtual items or services within a game. Despite some game developers considering this activity a violation as it can disrupt the game's internal economy and fairness, they have failed to clearly define the boundaries of RMT, given that they themselves sell game items in their own in-game stores that can impact game content. However, the emergence of RMT has undoubtedly further influenced players' consumption behavior within the game, facilitating the emergence of a service market among players. In this market, some players pay others to complete game content, such as daily quests, PVE events, or even to acquire advanced gear. For those who work in this market, the online game is not just a form of entertainment; rather, it is also a means of employment:

“Rare materials that can be collected in the game have refresh locations, so I built several avatars for collection, the number of which was equal to that of refresh points, and stopped them at the locations. Every time of refreshing I collected and mailed the materials to the production avatars, then I used the production avatars to make products and hang them on the auction house or send advertisements on the world channel. ...Pricing needs to be based on market price fluctuations. Maybe sometimes the market overflow, and the price will be relatively low. This is usually not the time to put the product on the shelf, or you will lose money.”

In the views of these players, items in the game that they make and exchange with others are no difference with the commercial goods. They convert their time and labor into the collection and production of game items and maximize their own revenue. In essence, the existence of both the buyers and sellers, and the service market they create, realize the transformation of resources invested by consumer, which is the replacement between labor and money invested in game items. Recent discussions of metaverse and decentralized virtual economies echo this historical shift, arguing that virtual assets increasingly function as investment objects with recognizable property-like

characteristics and off-platform exchange value (Foundations of decentralized metaverse economies, 2025).

However, these profit-oriented game behaviors have shattered players' utopian vision of a virtual world where they can freely explore, interact, create, and share without any real-world constraints. RMT and other profit-driven practices make it more difficult to gain benefits or success in the game, as some players rely on real money to obtain virtual resources and increase their levels. This not only undermines the fairness of the game but also weakens players' free will in the game, forcing them to pursue success by spending a great deal of time and money. In this case, players may lose their enthusiasm for the virtual world because they feel they are forced to participate rather than out of genuine interest and pleasure. Additionally, players may lose their competitive edge in the virtual world due to economic scarcity, which lowers their social status and sense of belonging in the game. Players also hold different views on those who use RMT rather than participating in game activities to gain social status and a sense of belonging, leading to division within the game community and weakening overall cohesion. As the game player community expands, the inequalities and tensions within the game may spread along the social network, affecting more groups and individuals. The once utopian vision of the virtual world has been tarnished, and the shift in consumer attitudes has had a profound impact on the community environment of future MMORPGs. From the perspective of this thesis, these developments mark an early moment where hybrid gift-market exchange starts to tilt towards more overt commodification, thereby setting the stage for later tensions between gift, anti-gift and malicious reciprocity that are analyzed in subsequent chapters.

5.4. Potential exchange of PVP

5.4.1. Action-oriented Role-Play Game and “Player-Killing”

In our analysis of historical records on online games, we paid particular attention to PVP game content. PVP mainly involves battles and combat between players and their avatars in the virtual world, and is considered an integral part of ORPG along with PVE

content. Although PVP was not initially regarded as a unique game mode in early online games, it played a crucial role in fulfilling the virtual life of players and, to some extent, spurred interaction between avatars. Given that PVP behavior only occurred between “players,” early PVP was naturally referred to as “Player-Killing (PK)” by players. This term remained in use for a considerable period before the formal introduction of the “PVP” title in conjunction with MMORPGs. In terms of game content, there are differences between PK and PVP in the virtual world. Generally, PVP is an umbrella term for various types of conflicts between avatars, including friendly matches, battles, and other forms of confrontation. In contrast, PK specifically refers to the act of attacking between avatars, with the purpose of causing the death and other losses of avatars.

Early PK behaviors were closely related to the game design of online ARPGs (Figure 13). Unlike SRPGs, in which players issue commands to their avatars, ARPGs allow players to directly control avatar behavior. This genre employs a real-time combat mode, which allows players to execute actions, such as combos, strikes, and skill releases, by manipulating their characters (Kao, 2020). The combat mode typically emphasizes players' reaction speed, operational skills, and tactical strategies. Compared with turn-based combat, real-time combat is more compact, exciting, and challenging. Players must continuously enhance their character's attributes to confront stronger enemies and more complex battle scenes. It is worth noting, however, that in the early stages of online ARPGs, an avatar's attribute was primarily determined by equipment and level. Therefore, the enhancement of the gaming experience through personal skill in controlling avatars was significantly limited. Instead, the pursuit of each ARPG player focused on advancing levels and acquiring top-tier equipment.



Figure 13 Play-Killing scenes in *Legend of Mir 2*

Source: Image from a news feature on ifeng.com.

Early online ARPG games drew heavily on the game model of single-player ARPGs, with Diablo (as depicted in Figure 14) being the most famous example. In the game, players could choose different roles, use different skills and equipment to explore various mazes, dungeons, and caves, fight various enemies, and collect loot. A key feature of the game was that each role had different skills and attributes. For example, warriors excelled in melee combat, mages excelled at ranged attacks, and priests excelled at healing and attribute enhancement. This role-playing mechanism made the gameplay more diverse and interesting, and laid the foundation for the role system of many subsequent MMORPGs, namely the “warrior-mage-priest” triangle structure. At the same time, the differences in role design allowed players to choose according to their own interests and preferences. In online games, this is reflected in the initial player immersion (Belk, 2013; 2014), which enhances players' immersion in the virtual world.



Figure 14 Avatar attribute interface of *Diablo 1*

Source: Image from the post “My Diablo 1 warrior so far…” on r/Diablo1 (Reddit).

In contrast to SRPGs, which place great emphasis on team cooperation, ARPGs prioritize individual player performance. This is largely due to the environment of early ARPGs, which was often characterized by the “Dark Forest Law” (Konior, 2020). The Dark Forest Law assumes the presence of independent, isolated, and unpredictable entities within the environment, where the likelihood of mutual aggression and destruction is exceedingly high. Consequently, communication and discovery among individuals are considered extremely perilous. Individuals in this environment resemble entities within a dark forest, each possessing a strong self-protection instinct and being disinclined to expose themselves to the outside world for fear of potential threats from others. Consequently, communication between individuals increases the likelihood of exposing one's existence and attracting attack, and thus is deemed a highly hazardous behavior (Konior, 2020, p.14). This is also why the frequency of communication and interaction among players in ARPGs is noticeably lower compared to SRPGs.

Additionally, there exists a unique death penalty mechanism in ARPGs whereby items and equipment carried by the character at death drop randomly in the vicinity of the character and can be picked up by other players. This special death penalty

mechanism presents a significant challenge to players, who must protect themselves and exercise caution during gameplay. They must continually accumulate equipment and items to enhance their strength and survival ability. However, even with such preparations, there is still a risk of losing all precious items if defeated by other players. Therefore, players primarily engage in solo play, despite occasionally teaming up for MF. Players must maintain a balance between pursuing individual power improvement and acting cautiously to avoid incurring excessively large losses. Moreover, this death penalty mechanism greatly stimulates players' competitive psychology, increases their participation and loyalty to the game, making it more attractive and playable. From the perspective of recent work on toxicity and "dark participation" in games, these high-stakes PK systems can also be read as early infrastructures for hostile, griefing-style interactions rather than purely neutral challenge mechanics (Kowert, 2020; Sun et al., 2024).

5.4.2. Social Potential of PVP

Despite early PK behavior consisting of attacks between players, it remains a potential way of socializing. It enables brief social connections between attackers and their targets, with the latter often seeking revenge driven by retaliatory psychology. However, as these connections are typically driven by temporary psychological factors, they seldom last long, making it difficult to sustain social relationships built on negative factors. Nevertheless, from another perspective, although these brief social connections are often negative, they have the potential to develop into long-term, stable social relationships. Later chapters conceptualize these revenge loops and retaliatory pursuits as one micro-level pathway through which adversarial interactions solidify into what this thesis terms anti-gift and malicious reciprocity.

Although looting is not the intention and purpose of PK behavior, the death penalty in PK does lead to passive object flow. This object flow can be seen as a passive and completely opposite exchange behavior. In fact, the loss of items is one of the main reasons for players to develop retaliatory psychology. Previous research has

demonstrated the importance of virtual possessions to players in virtual worlds. For example, in 2004, a player's virtual goods in "The Legend of Mir 2" were confiscated by the operator company, Shanda. After several fruitless protests, the player set himself on fire (Wang, 2004). Lehdonvirta (2012) reports that virtual goods are now some of the most valuable commodities for cybercriminals who attempt to hack into games and steal virtual possessions for resale. Mauco (2009) even reports a suicide of an Ever Quest player who was robbed of his digital possessions. These incidents caused controversy at the time and suggest a potentially strong attachment between consumers and their virtual possessions. In fact, these possessions are only meant for temporary ownership. A particular virtual item possessed by players may finally be exchanged, upgraded, and/or consumed in obtaining other virtual goods. Former equipment may be kept in storage as an antique. Nondigital objects that form a part of the extended self are often able to provide a sense of past through their association with events and people in our lives (Belk, 1991). Similarly, collections not only represent the efforts of players but also the memory of their playing time.

ARPGs also offer a potential positive social relationship paradigm. A fascinating discovery is that, despite the focus on individual combat in ARPGs, they actually possess one of the earliest "guild" systems in the history of online gaming. A guild is a social organization established by players themselves, aimed at promoting cooperation and social activities within the game. Guilds are typically created by a group of like-minded players who wish to team up for MF, share experience and resources, and collaborate or compete with players from other guilds. Given the unique environment of ARPGs, guilds became a collective affiliation for individual players, and game mechanics were accordingly designed to incorporate guilds as a unit for group activities. Figure 15 depicts the famous guild-based game event "Castle Siege" in *Legend of Mir 2*, where players participate in collective battles as a guild. This was one of the most prominent group combat events in early online gaming history, and provided a reference for the design of PVP activities in subsequent MMORPGs.



Figure 15 “Castle Siege” in *Legend of Mir 2*

Source: Image from an article on 17173.com about *Legend of Mir 2*.

Due to the fact that PK behavior is often viewed as a form of bullying and harassment, PVP content in updates and new ARPG products has been subjected to a series of restrictions and weakening measures to ensure a better gaming experience for ordinary players. Players are restricted from engaging in random PK behavior towards other players. For instance, in *Legend of Mir 2*, if Player-Killers excessively kill “innocent” players, once they die they would be punished by being sent to a special prison map and will not be able to resume normal gameplay until a certain amount of time has passed (Yoon & Cheon, 2014). These changes in the game mechanics have led to the emergence of “bounty hunters” in the player community, introducing a third party into one-on-one social relationships. Similar dynamics are visible in contemporary studies of toxic behaviour, where players both participate in and resist hostile practices, using counter-actions to police community norms and reassert moral boundaries (Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023; Kowert et al., 2024). Overall, the restrictions on PK

behavior have actually opened the door for PVP as a social practice. Subsequent improvements and designs of PVP modes in gaming products have allowed for competition while also maintaining player retention and expanding existing social relationships within the game. In this sense, historical PK systems can be seen as proto-forms of the adversarial exchanges that this thesis later theorizes as anti-gift: practices where harm, loss, and revenge circulate between actors, yet paradoxically contribute to the reinforcement of group cohesion and the sharpening of communal boundaries.

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter provides an exploration of the historical forms of online gift-giving and markets. As the online game market has evolved, gift-giving as a social practice has also undergone changes and advancements. The unique characteristics of online gift-giving in the virtual world are highlighted thanks to the game mechanics of the ORPG prototype. Concurrently, the online market in and around the virtual world has also grown and developed. Initially, the online game market did not exist in direct opposition to the gift economy, but instead demonstrated a possible trend of interweaving with it through the commercial nature of online game products. However, the shift towards real-world commercial models has disrupted the balance between gifts and markets, and directed consumer attitudes towards a more profit-oriented direction. Furthermore, the PVP content of games has garnered attention for its potential to facilitate social behavior in a chaotic environment centered around conflict and struggle. Despite this, collective behavior has also been observed in the context of PVP, suggesting that conflict-driven interactions can also contribute to social integration and group boundary formation.

In summary, this review of the development history of online gift-giving and markets provides background support for current research. Phase I shows how generalized gift exchange among strangers, hybrid “semi-sale, semi-gift” transactions, and high-stakes PVP encounters have co-evolved in early online games, offering historical precedents for the hybrid reciprocity, dark gifting and anti-gift practices analysed in later chapters.

The following empirical phases build directly on this foundation to examine how virtual gifts in contemporary MMORPGs interact with internal and external markets, and how both positive and adversarial forms of exchange shape social cohesion and social integration in online game communities.

6. PHASE II FINDING: GIFT AND ANTI-GIFT IN VIRTUAL WORLD

6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the research findings of the second research phase that emerge from a netnographic study of contemporary MMORPGs and their surrounding online communities. Following the historical analysis of original online games of SRPG and ARPG in Chapter 5, the findings of Phase II mainly focus on the social behaviours around gifting and anti-gifting in current Chinese MMORPG worlds and the related online communities. Gift giving has long been understood as a central mechanism of gift exchange and relationship work in anthropological and consumer research (Belk & Coon, 1993; Mauss, 1925; Sherry, 1983), and more recent studies of social gaming emphasise how cooperative play and sharing practices foster reciprocity, social capital and status in multiplayer online games (Bisberg et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022). Previous research of gift exchange has focused on the functional value of maintaining or expressing social relations. The research findings in this chapter further explore the role of virtual gifts in the social network of the online gaming world as a cultural symbol. At the same time, current overviews of online game communities highlight MMORPGs as important sites for generating and transferring social capital and for supporting players' well-being, which provides a broader backdrop for the analysis of gifting and anti-gifting in this chapter (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Sachan et al., 2025; Scheifer & Samuel, 2025; Wu & Chang, 2025). On the other hand, a series of changes to PVP in MMORPGs have introduced a totally reversed, malicious form of "dark gift". This special "exchange" is defined as "anti-gift" in this study, as it has caused a reversed movement of virtual items and reshapes the social network.

This chapter is composed of two parts, which respectively correspond to the two themes emerging in this phase. The first part presents virtual gifts in online game communities. The concept of virtual gift has been commonly used in previous

literatures of online gift (e.g., Belk 2013) and digital gift (e.g., Romele and Severo 2016) that refer to the gift in forms of digital goods such as music, videos and software. While in online games, virtual gift is mostly recognized as the non-physical game props obtained by avatars for use in the virtual world. These items are intangible and temporarily owned by consumers (Belk 2013). Gift exchange in online games originates as the volunteered mutual help between strangers and gradually becomes a social practice of establishing and maintaining relations. Inheriting and developing traditional Chinese culture, this spontaneous behavior is considered as a cultural symbol within online game communities and endows the virtual gifts with special value beyond their attributes of game props. Through the obtainment and use of virtual products, consumers achieve the self-satisfaction, and enjoy the personal and social identity the objects may bring to them in the virtual world. However, this sense of value has been continuously challenged by the monetary measure of the real market that is more willing to commercially evaluate virtual goods and trade them in real money. The commercialization of virtual marketplaces has changed part of consumers' attitude towards virtual gifts to economical exchanges. Despite the attempts by believers of non-monetary gift to counteract the negative effects of markets, the inseparability of online and offline inevitably leads to the mutual penetration of different value concepts. Cognitive biases and conflicts across the cultural boundary create a more complex exchange nature of virtual items, thus a more hybrid pattern of gift generates and influences the construction of social relations.

In the second part, particular attention is given to the “anti-gift” in online games and related online communities. Anti-gift in this research is defined basing on the framework of anthropological gifting framework (e.g., Sherry 1983, Skageby 2010). This kind of behavior usually appears in the PVP mechanism of online games, which is manifested as marauding and robbery through combat between consumers' avatars. What sets anti-gift apart from pure malicious behaviours is that it serves a self-interested purpose and a means to gain possession of others. Depending on the game

mechanics, anti-gift actor can range from individual player to organized player groups. The various scales endow anti-gift behaviours with different characteristics. It also makes the recipients (both individual and collective) of the behavior have different reactions. The victims may choose to directly reciprocate or pass the dark behaviours to others, which makes anti-gift an extensible, linear process. In addition, consumers would spontaneously bond together to counter anti-gift behavior, whether or not they have ever been victims. Such behavior crisscrosses the social network that anti-gift builds. Notably, anti-gift does not tell the community apart but contributes to community building, forms a social network of players, and strengthens their engagement with the game world.

Part I: Gift, from Reality to Virtual

6.2. Virtual gift in online games

Virtual gift in online games is often considered as a social practice derived from the real world, where a gift is defined as a good or service voluntarily provided to another person or group (Belk 1979) through some sort of ritual presentation. While in the virtual world, such goods or service are mostly in the form of game props with various attributes and functions. Despite the fact that items in online games are exchanged between avatars, it is believed that virtual gift giving and receiving are regarded as the behaviours of consumers. In contemporary MMORPGs, this consumer behaviour is further complicated by the high degree of avatar customization. As we discussed in the context section of Chapter 2, MMORPG enable consumers to create their own avatars by their wills. The customization of avatars in MMORPG is free enough to make consumers feel that they gradually not only become reembodied but increasingly identify as their avatars (Binark and Su”tcu” 2009; Robinson 2007; Taylor 2002). During the whole research process, it is noticed that our informants consistently referred to avatars with personal pronouns such as “I” and “he/she” when describing their gaming experiences, which was not so apparent in the records reviewed in previous SRPG and ARPG. As pointed out by Bartle (2004), players are their avatars in the

process of online games. Overtime, it seems that the character of the player's avatar may become more and more integrated into the player's self as a result (Bryant and Akerman, 2009; Fox, Bailenson and Tricase, 2013). So except for some specific context when it is necessary to separate players from their avatars, everything players experience in their avatars' view of the virtual world can be considered as their own experience. Recent work on MMOs similarly treats avatars as investable virtual selves that mediate social capital and relationships inside and outside games (Sachan et al., 2025; Scheifer, 2025; Choi & Williams, 2025), which supports my decision to treat avatar-level experiences as player experiences in this chapter.

It is mentioned in Chapter 5 that original gift exchange in online games often takes place in in-game activities by the form of mutual help. Most of our informants had the experience of giving or receiving gifts especially when they were "young". As poor supplies and naïve avatar attributions often drew them into danger, teamwork and cooperation naturally became predominate in early adventure. Players spontaneously formed temporary teams, "MF" dungeons and other dangerous areas, defeated strong enemies to complete missions and capture loot. They were used to give items such as potions, food and equipment to their temporary teammates and friends during the adventure to ensure the survival. Besides, accompanied with growth of avatar, more new items of high level became available, and the lower-level items were no longer needed. This part of props was also given to new avatars of other consumers to help them get through the early hard times, as the givers had already experienced and knew the difficulty. From the perspective of the new players, these gifts were described as "*really helped a lot at the beginning*", and made them "*feel a sense of kinship with the givers (individuals or collectives)*", echoing quantitative studies that show generosity in multiplayer games can trigger further gifting and prosocial behaviour across the network (Bisberg et al. 2022; Kim et al. 2022). Accompanied with the gift giving, initial social relationships were built between and givers and receivers by mutually adding to "friend list" in the game. Thus the gift was given the social quality and used as a way

of relationship-seeking.

In MMORPGs, this virtual gift originated from mutual help has been incorporated into daily game life. Such acts of kindness will spontaneously form and pass on in further games. In response to players' willing, several channels were set up to distribute assistance and are still used today. For example, in the “Newbie Chat Channel” in *FF14*, it is easy to catch some information like:

#1: “I have made some flying carpets. If sprouts want this lovely pet, just come to the tree of the main city and get it! As long as the quantity is limited.”

#2: “Come to the main city to receive beautiful clothes for free! 10 immediate shares or wait for more!”

The “sprouts” in the quotes is a nickname of new players in *FF14*, as the new comers will get a “sprout” logo near the name (Figure 16). When they reach a certain level, the sprout logo would disappear, proving that they are familiar enough with the game. In our observations, players who had once received such “sprout gifts” often returned later as mature players who initiated similar giving rituals, which resonates with recent evidence that gifting in MMOs tends to be contagious and travels through chains of indirect reciprocity (Bisberg et al. 2022; Kim 2025). We have noticed that those who had received gifts, especially sprouts, would do the same thing in the future. One sprout we observed in an early gift receiving posted a similar message of gift giving on the newbie channel a few months later. When we saw him again, he had been unsprouted and was handing out little toys make by himself to other players and sprouts. In our short conversation, he said the original gift make him realize and enjoy the peace and love atmosphere of the game. *“Once I got favors from other people, I think it is my duty to pass this goodness on to more people. I hope them could feel the goodwill of the game. May this kind of behavior continued to be passed on to create an ideal fantasy world.”*



Figure 16 "Sprout" logo in *FF14*

Source: Researcher's own in-game screenshot from *Final Fantasy XIV*.

It is indicated that the original gift in the virtual world is totally an act of altruism. The gift contains goodwill from the givers to help the receivers. Such gifts are not given with the expectation of reciprocity, but the givers would always get reciprocating. The help from players is always mutual. During our investigation, past gift-givers would always receive a "return gift" from the recipient at some point in the future, though it might not be immediate. Besides, these well-intentioned gifts were often considered to have the function of expressing social relations (Sherry 1983). The practice of gift exchange among social members linked them together. Those who have given or received gifts have put themselves in a social give-and-take network with others. And the gift exchange will spread through the network. This micro-level pattern is consistent with studies that characterize MMORPGs as important sites for building bonding and bridging social capital through everyday cooperative play and resource sharing (Grinyer et al. 2022; Gonçalves et al. 2023; Sachan et al. 2025). The original giver of the gift, the recipient of the gift, and other strangers who observe the process are all likely to continue the gift exchange in the future, and consolidate the social solidarity

through the act.

It is important to note that, while Sahlins (1972) predicts the concept of generalized reciprocity is most common in close kinship groups, the gift exchange in virtual world occurred mostly among strangers. Online players often call the process of entering a new game and creating a new avatar “*reincarnation*”, with the meaning of rebirth in a new world. Most players, except those who know each other in real life and enter the game with a companion, come to explore the virtual world alone. The reincarnation in the virtual world would not arrange them with established family and kinship. Therefore, it is particularly important for them to help and make friends with others. Meanwhile, nearly 70 percent of our informants felt it was the gift exchanged with someone they met for the first time that left them with the deepest impression. According to their states, “*the first gift, like the first greeting of ‘Nice to meet you.’, always brings back a lot of memories, elysian or sorrowful.*” Recent survey work with Chinese online gamers similarly suggests that participation in MMO communities, including informal helping, contributes to perceived social capital and life satisfaction (Pang et al. 2025), which supports my interpretation of these first gifts as emotionally charged relational events rather than trivial in-game transfers.

The practice of gift-giving has made the online environment more social. Compared with other types of online games like OFPS (Online First-person Shooting) and MOBA (Multiple Online Battle Arena), players in MMORPGs are more likely to expand their social networks by making new friends or joining new groups. Our informants said they preferred to first come together then get to know each other. For example, PVE players often post ads for group/guild recruitment when the raid is over. A raid takes about 2 hours on average, which is not enough for players to get to know each other. But it doesn't stop them from recruiting strangers into the social collectives and then gradually becoming familiar with them. “*It won't be a problem if you join a group that you're not familiar with, as you can easily make friends with other members by further participation in in-game activities.*” However, the new social relationship only

established between those who follow the rules of gifting. During the PVE raid activity, the leader or who requires the materials should bring the buff items to the whole team, while the members would return the dropped material to him/her. The return materials are random according to the game system, so there is a chance that the value of what s/he gets may be higher than what s/he gives. Such reciprocating is not strictly requested by the giver, but the team members are believed to have the obligation to return, and those who fail to reciprocate would usually be blamed by others.

Further more than a social practice, virtual gift is also given cultural significance in the online gaming context. Similar to Mauss (1925)'s discussion of Maori hau as the prototypical principle of reciprocity that involved belief in a force binding the receiver and giver, the spirit of gift in China is highly linked to the "manner" of Confucianism. Traditional Chinese culture focuses on the "reciprocity of courtesy" in interpersonal relationships, and believes that "*Courtesy on one side lasts not long.*". Meanwhile, gift-giving is considered a ritual of interpersonal relations. Both giving and receiving are social symbolic acts with cultural meaning. However, it should be noted that the compulsory reciprocity would not change the nature of gift exchange, as the reciprocity is principled by the cultural effect rather than expected human willing, thus it is still a social behavior out of altruism.



Figure 17 Ceremony of master-apprentice relationship

Source: Researcher's own in-game screenshot from JX3.

In MMORPGs, many social mechanics echo this cultural interaction. A typical social mode established by cultural gift exchange is the “mentoring system”. The prototype of the mentoring system is the mentorship in traditional Chinese culture, in which a “guardian” relationship was established between the apprentice and master. Such relationships were usually confirmed and protected with solemn customs and rituals. Referring to this traditional practice, the mentoring system in the games is designed as a guiding mechanism for new players. Veteran players establish mentoring relationships with new players to help them become familiar with the game and then participate in the game activities together. When the mentoring relationship is established, the apprentice would present a special gift in the game called “*Shu Xiu*” (a traditional Chinese ritual item of worship) to the mentor to bind the mentoring relationship (Figure 17). When the apprentice graduates, the mentor will return the apprentice a “seal” or other objects of certification to prove that the apprentice could go on his/her own adventure. The returned gift also marks the mentoring qualification for the apprentice, so that s/he could also become mentor of others in the game. It makes mentorship a transferable social relationship. The inter-generational social group of mentoring is called “*homegate*” (Figure 18). “*Homegate*” is a more intimate relationship due to the process of gifts and rituals, and it is considered as “a special existence independent of guilds, groups and other social groups”. These structures show how virtual gifting practices are layered on to culturally specific rituals and hierarchies, turning MMO spaces into arenas where Confucian styles of obligation and lineage are re-performed through digital items and ceremonial exchanges, rather than being

replaced by purely instrumental market logics.



Figure 18 “Homegate” Dendrogram in *JX3*

Source: Researcher's own in-game screenshot from *JX3*.

With the formation and expansion of social networks, gift-giving has gradually become a custom in online society. It is common to see the givers and recipients post their gifts in online games and other online communities, such as their personal WeChat moments and social media accounts. Figure 19 shows a post of a received virtual gift in *JX3*. The recipient “zokumo” posted the mail picture on the online forum “*JX3 bar*” to express her surprise at this unexpected gift from her friend. Such posts are often regarded as proof of a close relationship between the givers and the recipients. They are not only the reflection of recipients' feelings about receiving gifts, but also a part of the feedback and reciprocation to the giver. Some informants said “*they had the obligations to post what they received publicly as respect to the gift and the givers*”, which claim the reciprocity contained in the gift exchange. Meanwhile, gifts do not just function procedurally in the game, but become a medium for players to express their

emotions and show their social relationships with each other. This circulation of screenshots and narratives of gifting across platforms such as forums and WeChat also brings MMO gifting closer to broader digital gifting ecologies, where virtual gifts function as relationship signals and public performances of intimacy (Zhang & Liu, 2024; Volkmer & Meißner 2024), while still remaining anchored in the specific mechanics and cultures of Chinese MMORPGs.

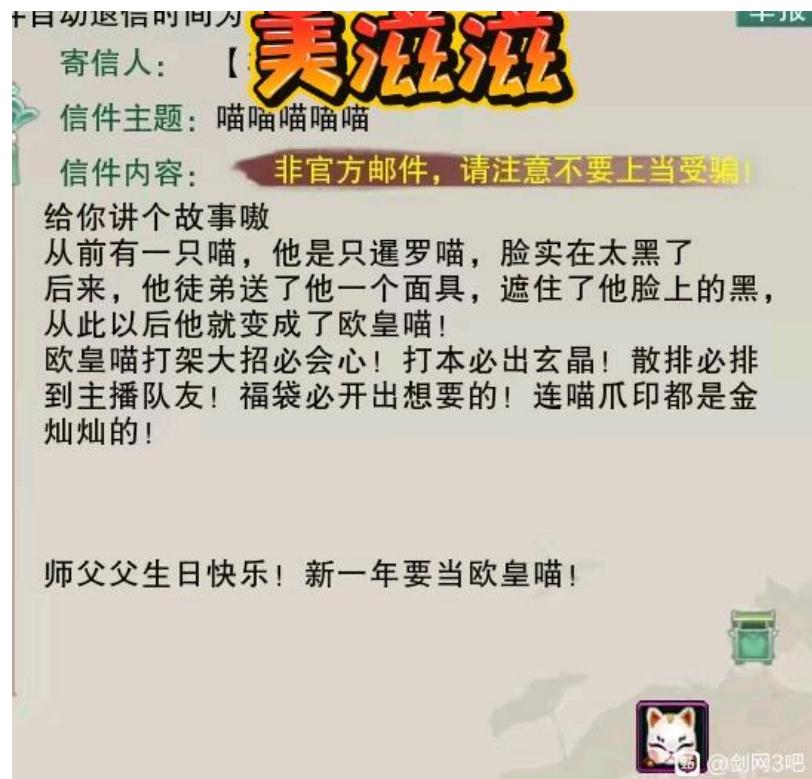


Figure 19 Gift posting via mail system in JX3

Source: Screenshot of an original post by user "zokumo" on JX3 Bar, 29 November 2020.

6.3. Consideration of gift value

Despite online gifts play a significant role in solidarity of the virtual world, there has always been a debate over the applicability of the virtual products as gifts. Previous literature has questioned the acceptance of virtual products as gifts in online communities (e.g., Charlton and Danforth 2004; Goode et al 2014). The lack of tangible substance makes digital possessions perceived as less authentic and valuable than physical objects (Marden and Belk 2018; Siddiqui and Turley 2006). Dematerialization of the intangible items has raised the question of whether consumers cherish immaterial

possessions as they can to material possessions (Belk 2013). Digital virtual possessions appear to lack some of the characteristics that invite attachment to material possessions (Watkins and Molesworth 2012), which indicate the neglect to received gifts draws less reciprocity under virtual environment. More recent research on digital possessions and virtual goods broadly echoes these concerns, but also shows that consumers can develop strong attachment to non material items when these are embedded in everyday practices, identities and social relations rather than treated as pure “files” or utilities (e.g. Gawron and Strzelecki 2021; Lim, Kim and Ko 2024; Abbasi et al. 2025).

However, things may be different in the virtual world of MMORPG. When examining the consumers-items relationship from the perspective of consumers, the immaterial of virtual goods tends to be selectively ignored, and the intangible objects are often regarded as self-owned properties. Despite the virtual nature, players still cherish the virtual items and invest a lot of time and resources acquiring them. The acquisition of virtual items is no less able to satisfy their desires than material goods (Lehdonvirta et al. 2012). Recent work on avatar-based consumption similarly suggests that players incorporate avatar possessions into an extended sense of self and worth, where “my avatar’s gear” becomes a visible proxy for competence, taste and commitment (Lim et al. 2024; Abbasi et al. 2025). Some of our informants recalled an incident involving a dispute over game items in the most famous MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (also called *WOW*). *WOW* has always faced game data transfer problems due to the change of operator in China. “*Most of us spent our youth in Azeroth. However, it was until we were in danger of losing it forever that we realized it was just a set of data.*” The fear of losing virtual items indicates a strong attachment to the virtual objects. In 2004, a player’s virtual goods in “*The Legend of Mir 2*” were confiscated by the operator company, Shanda. After several protests had been fruitless, the player lit himself on fire (Wang, 2004). Lehdonvirta et al. (2012) reports that virtual goods are now some of the most valued commodities for cybercriminals, who attempt to hack into games and steal virtual possessions to resell. Mauco (2009) even reports a suicide by

an Ever Quest player who was robbed of his digital possessions. Such incidents all caused wide controversy at a time and suggest a potentially strong attachment between consumers and their virtual possessions.

On the other hand, the behavior of players also places additional value on virtual products. It is mentioned above that virtual objects are endowed with social and cultural significance when used as gifts. In particular social circumstances, they are served as signals of affection or esteem or other relationship signals. For example, the ring in MMORPG is originally a kind of equipment, which can improve the intelligence attribute of the avatar. But when exchanged as a gift to others, it is often seen as an expression of love and a seeking for a romantic relationship. In this sense, virtual gifts work as what Mauss describes as “total social facts”, condensing economic, affective and symbolic dimensions into a single object that circulates in a network of obligations. Previous research has also shown that virtual products could enhance the expression of personal identity. These objects enhance user perceptions of personal presence, despite their intangibility and virtuality, thereby contributing to personal individuality (Hassanein and Head 2006). More recent studies of virtual goods and skins economies similarly show that items function as visible markers of taste, status and group belonging rather than mere functional upgrades (Gawron and Strzelecki 2021; Gong 2023).

Besides, the virtual products could also attach social identity or, further, social status for players and their avatars. The top gear that avid players chase is usually extremely sacred to ensure the value (Lehdonvirta 2009). The acquisition of such items always requires a lot of efforts. Players need to constantly invest time and money in improving the avatars' attributes to participate in more or most difficult PVE events in a particular version. Thus, the acquisition of rare items (usually equipment and collections) always means a nod to the strength of both. the one who gets the rare drop first deserves to be admired by others. One of our informants Morgan mentioned the acquisition of his first legendary weapon, *Thunderfury, Blessed Blade of the Windseeker*. Besides a list of

materials that were hard to acquire at that time, the forging of this legend equipment also need two separate legend items with a drop rate of 0.3%, which required both participation and good luck. With each CD of the dungeons involved, it took him two years to gather all the materials successfully and he “*jumped excitedly out of his room from the second floor*” at the moment he got it. Accompanied with the successful acquisition, players would also feel that their efforts have finally paid off and get a sense of achievement. Correspondingly, similar rare acquisitions are also rewarded by the game's systematic approach, which gives the player a unique social status while highlighting the acquisition of legendary items (Figure 20). In these terms, the virtual goods used to enhance the performance of one's avatar online are often seen as an integral part of the self and as a way to establish player hierarchy in both online and offline spaces. This hierarchy is not only mechanical, measured by damage numbers or item levels, but also symbolic, since legendary items signal perseverance, networking capacity and knowledge of the game meta.



Figure 20 The achievement of Thunderfury, Blessed Blade of the Windseeker

Source: Researcher's own in-game screenshot from *World of Warcraft*.

It should be noted that, as the virtual products are only known and recognized among players, the perceived value of virtual goods remains limited to cultural communities (Lehdonvirta 2009). Without the context in which the intangible goods are based, it is hard for consumers to understand symbolic meaning of specific cultural background. A simple example is that for those who do not play online games, the objects in the virtual world seems to be meaningless to them, and they cannot understand the implications of use and consumption of virtual products. While when it comes to the new players, some of the participants shared their stories as they “*cherished the garbage while threw the treasure*” when they just began their game life. It would take time before they could recognize the virtual goods and identify the values of them. Thus, the perceived value of the virtual items is related to the degree of addiction in the online community. Recent MMORPG studies add that perceived value also depends on players’ trajectories of learning and socialization, where guild norms, fan guides and influencer content gradually stabilize shared hierarchies of items and tastes (e.g. Abbasi et al. 2025; Pang et al. 2025).

As a consequence, when the virtual item is exchanged as a gift, the possible cognitive difference between giver and receiver may cause the weakening of the symbolic meaning it contains. While the economic worth of virtual gift seems to get more attention from consumers, as the virtual goods have been naturally marked and evaluated by in-game currency. The in-game currency refers to the “money”, “gold” or other representation of value that avatars use for exchange with other NPCs and avatars in the virtual world (Wang and Mainwaring 2008). Since virtual gifts are generally items that could be circulated in the virtual world, such items can often be measured with virtual currency. However, virtual gifts under this mode of valuation are often not considered as monetary, as virtual currency, like other virtual items, is also earned by players’ effort during the game. Players believe the currency in online game “*is just a special virtual item that can be used by avatars for exchange and trade, as we also paid time and effort to obtain*”, so the items used for gifting can still be valued but not

necessarily “contaminated” by commerce.

However, the measurement of gift value has been gradually challenged by the commercial exchange since players were allowed to purchase virtual products by real-world currencies (Guo and Barnes 2007). It has been mentioned in Chapter 5 that the item-billing mode has led to the normality of internal game market. The possibility of buying virtual products enable monetary measurement of virtual products for outsiders, as it regulates the evaluation standard of virtual items to some extent. While in current MMORPG environment, the effect from real market continues to function and invade the area of general exchange. When intangible virtual goods are “materialized,” they can be measured in monetary terms regardless of their context. The parallel transformation of business model and currency system has caused the change of virtual society's attitude towards gift exchange. The Internet environment was once considered as a virtual realm apart from reality (Turkle, 1995). It has been mentioned in previous literature that digital gift created a gift economy exclusive to online space (Rheingold, 2000), which was represented as a form of daily life in a virtual society in which consumers do things for one another out of a spirit of building something between them. Thus, the digital gift was considered to have anti-economical character, which referred to an alternative, a reply or integration to the capitalistic market economy. However, recent work on live-streaming and platformed virtual gifting shows that monetary valuation, rankings and conversion rates are now built into the architecture of many digital gift systems, which complicates early utopian narratives of a separate digital gift economy (e.g. Baldacchino 2022; Guo et al. 2024; Ma 2023). But the line between online and offline seemed less clear after the monetary evaluation of virtual products. What followed was the interpenetration between network social relations and real life, which involved the infiltration of social context and social ideas. In this thesis, this tension between symbolic gift value and explicit price tags provides the backdrop for the hybrid exchanges observed in MMORPGs, where virtual gifts circulate simultaneously as culturally saturated “gifts” and as objects that can, at least potentially,

be translated back into monetary terms.

6.4. Gift commercialization and hybrid exchange

As a consequence of commodified virtual products, the original type of social exchange was squeezed by a more economical form. For example, players started to complain that they failed to receive the return gift they expected from their gift recipients.

#1: “I gave him a 300-yuan clothing, but he only returned me a pet of less than half of the price.”

#2: “I gave my partner a horse for Valentine. All I got for return was a ‘thank you’ card.”

According to the quotes, players began to measure and compare the value of the gift and expect reciprocating. The reciprocal gift that givers received from the recipient did not meet their expectations, because the value of the two gifts was not equal or even significantly different. In further discussion, they expressed their thoughts as “*the return gift should at least be as valuable as what they gave*”. Such cases refer to a balance reciprocity that advocates an immediate and equal reciprocating from the recipient, which was more like an economical exchange.

The changing nature of gift exchange in virtual worlds has caused the antipathy of players to monetary evaluation of virtual products. Our informants said the exchange of virtual goods in such context was more perceived as a “consumption” rather than a gift. The increasingly materialistic atmosphere caused players to pay more attention to the value of game items while ignoring their symbolic significance in different situations. “*When someone who regularly browses trading messages saw a prop in the game, what s/he will see is the price number rather than the item itself.*” The perspective of the real market forced players to monetarily weigh the gifts. The giver would decide the price of the gift according to the role of recipient, expecting something in return that matches the value of the gift, or some other kind of return. It is argued that the gift form was subsumed under the commodity form and could even be used directly for achieving profit. Hence, the digital gift functioned as a legitimizing

ideology and the virtual gift as a non-monetary instance had lost most of its appeal (Fuchs 2009). Recent work on platformed virtual gifting and live-streaming similarly shows how rankings, conversion rates and monetized gifting routines can hollow out earlier ideals of “pure” digital gifts and normalize calculative comparison among participants (Baldacchino 2022; Guo et al. 2024; Ma 2023).

Facing the commercialization of virtual gifts, the natives of traditional MMORPGs have shown the support to the ordinary non-monetary nature of gifts. They believe that commercial gift exchanges fail to express the goodwill and emotions that should be included in the original gift giving. The reason for this phenomenon is the dilution of the value of virtual goods by the real monetary system. Even without material loss or cost virtual gift-giving still requires time, thoughtfulness, and effort to give (Belk 2013), while the monetary evaluation of virtual products quantifies the former and ignores the latter.

As a response to the real market, a strict banning of real money trade (RMT) was adopted for the first time in the MMORPG product *FF14*. It stated that virtual items in the game cannot be obtained by other means, and that any acquisition of virtual items through non-game currency would be considered as a violation and punished. Some player feedbacks under the principles are below:

#1: “This game is where you want to spend real money but don't even know how to spend it. All the things that happen in fast food games where wealth means power don't work in *FF14*.”

#2: “Banning RMT allows players to focus more on measuring the value of an item from an in-game perspective. In other words, not as utilitarian as other online players.” These quotes indicate that *FF14*'s prohibition of RMT affects in-game players' metrics for in-game items. This rule greatly closes the possibility of *FF14*'s in-game items being connected to the player's real wealth. Compared to similar online games, *FF14* players tend to focus on the in-game items themselves, rather than valuing gifts in terms of real money. This promotes a virtuous cycle of consumption within the game world. Gift

exchange in an RMT prohibited environment is much closer to the original form in MMORPG. On one hand, players still earn virtual items through their own efforts and send them as gifts. These objects are considered to retain their original social value. On the other hand, adherence to the virtual currency system keeps them immersed in the virtual world. In contrast to platform environments where gifting is tightly tied to cash-out functions, *FF14*'s design actively protects a gameplay-based valuation of virtual gifts.

While in other MMORPG products like *JX3* and *World of Warcraft*, the commercialization of virtual gift has been gradually accepted by players. Under the effect of a balance exchange environment, both givers and recipients may think more about the gifts they give and receive. As for the givers, the gift may change from the practice with social meaning to a mere formality, or even evolve into a transaction. Perhaps the gift still contains the generous intentions, but as Sahlins(1979) described as “Balance Reciprocity”, people tend to expect a more immediate and equal reciprocation. As quoted in previous text, gift-giving at a specific point (such as Valentine's Day) still contains romantic love between the online couples. But when the reciprocal gift failed to meet the standard of the giver, the tensions may occur in the established relationship and cause a change or break of it. It should be noted that although the result also led to the breakdown of personal relationship, this kind of situation is different from the one-sided gift mentioned above. It is caused by the fact that the exchanges between the two sides have not reached parity. In fact, the balance exchange does not necessarily build the social relationship between the giver and the receiver (Sahlins 1979). Pure transactions are usually transitory, while the gift under the environment of balance exchange environment represents a situation between generalized and balance reciprocity. In this thesis, this “in-between” zone is conceptualized as a form of hybrid exchange, where actors oscillate between treating an item as a gift that carries obligation and as a priced good that can be compared and calculated.

As to the recipients, the “balanced gift” also affects the attitude of recipients toward gifts, although the givers may not have given gifts in the mind of equivalent exchange. “When you receive a gift, it brings more annoyance than happiness. It felt like a debt which should be repaid with return gifts. The reciprocal gift should have the same value as the gift you received, or you will feel guilty.”

In section 6.2 we have examined the posting of received gift from recipients. Despite that posting is not a fully implement of reciprocity, it will become evidence of a sense of indebtedness that remind the recipient to fulfill the obligation of return in the future. The disclosure of one's gifts is also the disclosure of one's debts. As the value of the gifts grows, a gift-recipient's experience of indebtedness is likely to be stronger for a more expensive gift compared with a less expensive one. One of our informants described the billing case of PVE gold team as below:

“Gold Team is an organizational form of PVE raid. In this team, equipment and other item rewards earned after defeating a boss are auctioned off throughout the team. The auction proceeds are paid as wages to the team members who contribute. Since loot drops are BOP (Bind of Pickup) and cannot be traded with others after being acquired, I could bid for others during auctions, and the item would be served as a gift to the person I am bidding for...To tell the truth, although I bid on things for others, I don't expect others to bid for me. I can buy anything I need. Even though I cannot afford it, I don't like to be in debt.”

According to this informant's statement, his attitude towards the Gold Team is ambivalent. He is not averse to giving such “bidding gifts” to others, while he has clearly expressed his distaste for receiving them. In the case of gold team, the process of gift giving is completely open, including the gift, the process of giving and the economic worth of the gift. The act of public gift-giving in the group directly shows that tensions have been given to the recipients during the period. The bidder may simply give the item as a gift, but the recipient will assume that receiving the priced gift in such a public setting will entail debt that has to be repaid regardless of the giver's expectation

at a later time. As a result, faced with this type of gift, some players will directly refuse their identity as recipients. They resist this type of gift and pay the auction price themselves, or show resistance by simply refusing to accept the gift.

Furthermore, the willingness to be a giver and the aversion to be a taker is indicative of how players react to the “hybrid exchange” when gift exchanges are influenced by commerce. When players give and return gifts in such context, gift exchange shows the fact of a balance exchange instead. In view of the value and particularity contained in virtual gifts and its applicable consumer groups and cultural background, it presents a hybrid nature of reciprocity. The same transfer of an item can therefore be experienced simultaneously as a generous act, a public performance of status and a burdensome debt, depending on the actor’s position. Such gift/equality exchanges are valid when the two sides of a gift exchange match. In other cases, the revealing of differences between the stances of actants would announce the breakdown of the social relationship (Sherry 1983).

Marcoux (2009) ever argued that consumers may turn to the market as an escape from the gift economy, because of the sense of indebtedness and emotional oppression. Similarly, in a different context, the players here make the same choice. Gifting behaviour is terminated by either paying in advance or refusing to accept a gift. As rumors of gifts are always happily accompanied by discussions of the giver and recipient, such behavior will affect the judgment of other members of the social group on the giver and the recipient. The passive cancellation of the gift makes the giver lose face, thus causing possible tension or rupture of the relationship and setting the stage for possible negative behavior in the future. These dynamics illustrate how hybrid reciprocity in MMORPGs can slip toward market-like logics when obligations feel too heavy, while still formally operating through the language and rituals of gifting.

Part II: Anti-Gift, the dark side of online games

6.5. Anti-gift in online games

The second part of Phase II shifts the focus from cooperative gifting to conflictual

exchanges in the PVP arenas of contemporary MMORPGs. PVP is a type of multi-player interactive conflict within the game. Players enter matches or open-world encounters with each other, facing a more complex and intelligent opponent. They study the effects of combinations of different abilities and hone their skills in real competitions. The PVP engagement intensifies the social interactions from cooperation to competition. In products such as JX3 and World of Warcraft, PVP has become not only a distinct ludic mode but also a central arena where status, reputation and inter-group rivalry are negotiated. Recent work on toxicity and dark participation in online games similarly notes that competitive systems can foster harassment, griefing and strategic aggression alongside ordinary play (e.g., Frommel et al., 2023; Kordyaka et al., 2023). Parts of PVP behaviours have also been criticized as improper. This kind of behavior is often malicious and interferes with the normal play process of other players. These malicious behaviours emerge from the very few restrictions online games impose on the virtual world. According to Yee (2006) and Lehdonvirta (2012), the virtual world and its components are no less real or able to satisfy the desires of consumers. The virtual world confers social status and standing in human society (Castranova 2001), however, unlike real life where rules and laws discipline social members' behaviours, online virtual worlds continue to be seen as spaces that offer players the possibility to escape their own “real” lives and the pressures that they are facing every day. It allows the players to express themselves in ways that they may not feel comfortable with in real life (Herold 2012). Similar activities in reality are strictly prohibited because they violate laws and social morality, but the virtual world of online games provides a “lawless zone” where people are not constrained by the real environment. Players through avatars can freely initiate and respond to PK between each other in a virtual environment. The lawless virtual environment makes their thoughts amplified and easily behave against good faith with comparatively much lower cost of crime, thus makes PVP a “second life” of expanded freedom and amplified risk.

Online gaming provides a rich context to advance existing research that attends to

the role of consumption in aiding the dark side of human nature. During our investigation, we paid much attention to the MMORPG product *JX3*, where players engage in PVP in ways that directly move virtual items between avatars. For instance, players could get special currencies by attacking others, and on some special occasions they could even get others' possessions through these attacks. Such situation is described as followed:

“To be honest, majority of PVP players focus on the Battle Arena instead of simple Player Killing (PK). But the PVP style decides that we need to improve our abilities, or our avatars' abilities, through daily activities containing PK in the wild. So when we leave the safe areas, we need to be prepared to fight with others. ...The PVP system gives us some daily missions every day through which we could get some points, or currencies, to buy the PVP equipment. In the previous editions, one of the daily missions was to escort the cargoes for our faction, and players from the opposite faction may rob us on the way. Once killed by others we would lose part of the cargoes. We had to go to grab them back, otherwise we need to bear the loss ourselves. ... The system designs that people will lose 10% of their total cargoes when killed by others, so sometimes we could fortunately get more than we lose after kill the robbers.”

It is obvious in these quotes that even though the actions of the players are relatively simple, they constitute a preliminary practice of social interaction. In this practice, some players initiate the robbery of others through avatars, causing the robbed players lose part of their possession. For certain reasons, such as “to get back what they have lost” or “to gain more” as quoted, the robbed players revenge on the marauders. Rather than treating these encounters as pure griefing or random bullying, this thesis conceptualises them as a specific, exchange-oriented pattern. Building on anthropological gifting frameworks (e.g., Sherry, 1983; Skågeby, 2010), these hostile transfers are read as a dark variant of gifting in which objects still circulate between actors, but under conditions of coercion, rivalry and obligation. Such interaction resonates with the notion of “anti-gift” (Hyde 1983) that opposed to the gift as articulations of love,

friendship, and gratitude (Cheel 1998). Here, anti-gift refers to those PVP practices where virtual items are forcibly or conditionally transferred through conflict, binding marauders and victims into ongoing expectations of response. The logic remains one of exchange and reciprocity, but the motive force is malicious reciprocity rather than altruistic obligation, which will be developed further in Section 6.6. In the following part, our findings would elaborate on the “anti-gift” in the current MMORPG, not as simple robbery but as a patterned form of dark gifting that exploits the same infrastructural channels as ordinary gift exchange.

Basically, the anti-gift system is composed of “marauding”, “losing” and “revenging”. For the players of PVP in MMORPG, they “maraud” others from the opposite factions and those who are defeated will lose some of their virtual goods to the marauders. Every gift call for a return (Hyde 1983). It is the same as the anti-gift, that is, the marauding behaviour in MMPROG. The victims generally fight back to get their cargoes or other possessions back. Sometimes they even exploit the marauders’ possessions, which is the same as that the increase is the core of the gift. As a result, a basic model of “Marauding-Losing-Revenging” is formed through the players’ behaviours. Because victims frequently become revengers and successful revengers may in turn be targeted later, this model is cyclical and dynamic rather than a single linear transfer. It therefore illustrates how anti-gift operates as a circulating practice of malicious reciprocity, where each act of loss implicitly demands a counter-move.

As a social practice, anti-gift in MMORPG is also given cultural significance in a specific context. It is highly similar to the “Wu Xia” or chivalrous culture in ancient China. Xia usually refer to people who are admired for having highly skilled in martial arts and enforcing justice emotionally and personally. In the description of literary works, they advocate their own justice and often rob the rich to give to the poor (Hamm 2004). The product of MMORPG also designs the background setting of virtual world according to this point. For example, players involved in PVP of JX3 must choose between two factions, Noble Alliance (NA) and Villain Valley (VV). Individual player

could attack others of the opposite faction with no limitations in most of the areas in the gaming world to gain rewards from the game system, and collective battles would also take place between opposing factions. These narrative frames invite players to interpret marauding and counter-marauding through a moral lens of justice, vengeance and factional honour rather than as meaningless griefing. In that sense, anti-gift is embedded in a culturally resonant script of “robbing the rich to help the poor”, even when the actual behaviour is closer to opportunistic looting. This context offers the anti-gift with symbolic meaning in the virtual world as everyone fights for what they believe is right. Meanwhile, it also decides that the actants of anti-gift could be individuals or groups, so that anti-gift appears as a social phenomenon that occurs within the online community of particular players with its importance shifting according to the intensity of PVP activity.

6.6. Malicious reciprocity

Reciprocity is the key element of exchange (Belk 1983). When it comes to anti-gift in MMORPG, the marauding and revenging behaviours are similarly motivated by a form of malicious reciprocity that underpins the exchange logic of PVP encounters rather than standing outside gift relations. In this thesis, malicious reciprocity refers to an overarching, adversarial mode of reciprocity that structures how players respond to harm, loss and humiliation in the PVP arena. The malicious reciprocity goes beyond negative reciprocity, which Sahlins (1972) indicates as not necessarily malicious and robbery-like. It could have different forms and cause differences in players' behaviours, thus influencing their social relationships and making the PVP environment violent and turbulent. Anti-gift, as described in Section 6.5, is treated as the micro-level, practice-based expression of this broader malicious reciprocity, enacted through specific cycles of marauding, losing and revenging. Similar escalatory cycles of retaliation and counter-retaliation have also been noted in recent work on toxic reciprocity and griefing in online games (e.g., Frommel et al., 2023; Kordyaka et al., 2023).

First form is the direct revenge, which refers to direct fight-backs to marauders. As

we described above, the direct revenge often occurs among victims and comprises the basic models of anti-gift. It is the most straightforward expression of malicious reciprocity, in which the obligation to respond is experienced as a personal debt that must eventually be settled.

“When I was a rookie, I was often attacked by others. You know that being robbed always makes people angry, so at that time I put down these people's IDs (the names of the avatars) on a small notebook. As I got stronger and better equipped, I found those people and killed them one by one according to the names on this notebook. It was interesting that some of them were surprised to realize that they were revenged for their robbery a long time ago.”

The quotes show that it would take time for the victim to prepare fighting back, and the victim could revenge several times before the final success. Thus, we define the direct revenge as the revenge behaviour that occurs between the marauder and victim, which could have the feature of time delay. The temporal gap does not weaken the perceived obligation; instead, it turns revenge into a long-term project that ties together past injury and future “repayment”.

Besides, the revenge could be indirect. In some of the cases, as the losers are not as strong as the marauder, they will temporarily choose to endure the loss and impose their negative feelings on weaker players to make up their loss. We call this the “scapegoat revenge”. The following quotes describe the scapegoat revenge from different kinds of players in PVP.

“There is also a kind of PVP players who bully the weak and fear the strong. When they are attacked in the wild by those in opposite factions, they don't fight back with those veteran opponents, but turn to the mission point to kill the rookies instead. For example, sometimes I attacked opposite players in the wild, and my rookie friends told me they were attacked by those who I attacked a moment ago. ...In fact, they are not necessarily bad people. After all, they are the first victims, and they may also be angry. Personally, I regard their behaviours a disgrace. But from the other perspective, it is

common for people to vent their anger on others, otherwise they will drive themselves crazy.”

The scapegoat revenge is indirect as it involves participants as new victims in the anti-gift model. Through these revenging behaviours, the maraud-lose-revenge behaviours in the anti-gift system will be passed on to other players as the marauded players turn to maraud others. Hyde (1983) points out that the gift must always move, and the goodwill will be transferred to the next receiver rather than the owner. Once the gift stops moving, the generosity will turn to bad faith like hunger and greed. Likewise, in the case of anti-gift, the malicious reciprocity is passed on. The original victims should always pass the “losing” to someone they are able to, otherwise the accumulated negative emotions caused by continued failure will ruin their gaming experience. In such a situation, they are both victims and marauders, and such behaviours invisibly link unfamiliar players together and eventually make connections of lines and network, which is similar with the collective gift exchange (Hyde, 1983). “Perhaps no one has got more than he did to begin with, but society has appeared where there was none before.” (Hyde 1983, p.96). Scapegoat revenge therefore extends malicious reciprocity beyond the original dyad, redistributing loss and humiliation across the wider player ecology and drawing new actors into the anti-gift network.

In addition, there is also another kind of indirect revenge by countering the marauders of others, which we name as “transfer revenge”. Instead of marauding others and passing on the malicious experience, victims engaged in transfer revenge no only take revenge on their marauders but also the marauding behaviours of others. Merlin, the leader of a famous counter-maraud guild in *JX3*, described the case in the interview:

“When I just reached full-level, I was often ‘killed’ by stronger players in the gaming process. Sometimes they just regarded you as enemies that need to be killed, regardless whether you were new in the game. To be honest, I can understand the player-killing (PK) between the strong ones. After all, it is what the game mechanism has decided. But PK on green hands and noobs doesn’t ensure any high number of rewards, and this

kind of behavior doesn't resonate the definition of 'Wu Xia' at all. So, we organized 'Hero' and fought against those who bully green hands and other players. After we became strong enough to protect ourselves as well as our friends, we countered the marauders in the gaming world. Even though there are no laws in this world, justice must be upheld to protect the weak."

Different from the scapegoat revenge, the choice of Merlin and his guild was to transfer their revenge to other marauders by countering the further anti-gift behaviours. They try to control and eliminate the potential anti-gift cycle from passing on. On comparison, the good faith in anti-gift system is similar to the bad faith in gift system that suspects no return and breaks the cycle in gift exchange (Hyde 1983). However, the cycle of anti-gift cannot be completely eliminated by violence against violence, because from another perspective the transfer revengers could also be regarded as marauders towards original marauders. Thus, what they eventually could achieve is breaking the existing network and cutting off the original process from a certain point, generating new directions for possible developments. Transfer revenge behaviour is not a simple pass-on in a linear structure of anti-gifting, but an extension and intervening among different cycles thus complement the network of anti-gift system. In this sense, transfer revenge embodies an ambivalent form of malicious reciprocity: it is motivated by indignation and a desire for justice, yet it still relies on retaliatory violence and continues to circulate loss within the community, albeit along altered paths.

As mentioned above, the transfer revenger behaviour would also influence the original marauders and make them respond. Virtual world has created the illusion of a wide-open world to players, but in fact a gaming server that supports the online gaming world has a ceiling. Social circles in this world have boundaries and their contents are relatively fixed. The same initiator of various anti-gift behaviour will be easily recognized by the public and become the target of public criticism and attract transfer revengers. Often these recidivists choose to assemble as a guild or organization, thus shifting the individual behaviour to the collective. Over time, malicious reciprocity

therefore consolidates relatively stable role positions within the PVP community, such as repeat marauders, chronic victims and organized avengers, and turns episodic conflicts into a patterned, networked structure of dark exchange.

6.7. Anti-Gift and social solidarity

While Hyde's (1983) viewpoint suggests that destructive or exploitative exchanges ultimately undermine social bonds, the findings of this thesis indicate that the anti-gift behaviours driven by the malicious purpose do not really separate players apart. Aggressive behaviors such as looting and pillaging are often considered selfish, and egoistic behaviours often lead to the end of social relationships. However, the anti-gift system in MMORPG has established and consolidated the social relationships among the players as well as their engagement in the online communities. Under the behaviours of different forms of revenge, the anti-gift system links the individuals and collectives by a social network. It forms and shapes relationships among individuals and collectives who play the roles of marauders, victims, and revengers (either original or transferred). In other words, anti-gift operates as a dark variant of gift exchange: it still circulates objects, loss and obligation through the network, but does so through harm, retaliation and competitive display rather than generosity.

For individuals, the PVP mechanism means that players improve themselves and hone their skills by continuously attacking or being attacked. In fact, the marauders, victims and revengers are mutually improving each other. The competitiveness of PVP makes them more engaged in the gaming world through marauding and revenging. *“The training of the game level and the improvement of skills are both important incentives of PVP game content, which are considered to share the spirit of competitive sports.”* Besides, “the bonds that establish are not simply social, they may be spiritual and psychological as well” (Hyde 1983, p.97). The great adversary is also the great friend, and it is common that the mutual anti-gift behaviours eventually transform into friendships. In this sense, malicious reciprocity intensifies players' commitment to PVP while simultaneously creating opportunities for grudging respect, routine interaction

and, over time, friendship between former enemies.

In fact, those who refuse the anti-gift from passing on are more likely to quit. Despite the dominant position of PVP in JX3, the marauding-losing-revenging behavioural style is not welcome by all the PVP players. During our investigation, we found that some players complained about being bullied, but the responses below were more of a lack of understanding of the behavior and a need to persuade these players to quit rather than a comfort. These reactions illustrate the limits of malicious reciprocity: players who do not accept its obligations and rhythms tend to remove themselves from the network rather than remain as stable “non-participants”.

#1: ” If you get hit, just hit back. If you can't beat it, just work on your skills. Weak is temporary, but people accustomed to kneeling cannot stand up eventually. ”

#2: “Frankly, I don't understand why you want to play PVP. If it brings you nothing but pain, try another game.”

As Hyde (1983, p.114) described, “We often refuse relationship, …because we sense that the proffered connection is tainted, dangerous, or frankly evil. And when we refuse relationship, we must refuse gift exchange as well.” The victims who fail to reciprocate stop the “anti-gift” from passing on to the next actants. It is difficult for them to rekindle the will of revenge because of their decision to abandon this relational circuit. The experienced pressure and pain therefore eventually drive them out of the social community. Social solidarity around PVP is thus maintained not because everyone participates, but because those who cannot tolerate malicious reciprocity quietly leave, leaving behind a population that broadly accepts its logics.

As for collectives, the anti-gift system facilitates the building of communities in the online gaming world by players who share the same purpose, either robbing others, or protecting the weaker against marauders, which makes community members more connected to each other. Players in organized collectives mainly engage in large-scale direct revenge between two opposite factions. Competing for strongholds allows them to maraud supplies and points from opposing faction players, and they would also be

revenged by the opposite players. During this constant fighting, it has been difficult to trace the origin marauder and victim of anti-gift. It can be argued that in the long run of direct revenge, the two opposing factions mutually initiate the process of maraud and revenge, and such collective behaviours are carried out collectively by individual players who participate in faction activities. In this process, the internal faction is experiencing a continuous integration process. Both individual and collective participants in faction activities are chasing power and status in the virtual world. The same pursuit builds social relationships between them, and with the deepening of participation, the relations become increasingly close, thus enhancing the integration between players in the same faction. Malicious reciprocity therefore works at the collective level as an external pressure that crystallises factional identities and deepens intra-group cohesion.

Besides, there are PVP players in JX3 who do not participate in faction activities, but voluntarily organise to conduct collective activities. Such behaviours are often accompanied by scapegoat revenge. In this case, some players are killed by players of the opposite faction in the process of delivering goods. After completing their own tasks, they will head to the enemy's merchant route and choose targets that are less equipped than themselves in order to take revenge. The victims of scapegoat revenge may carry on this revenge to the next victims, so as to realize the delivery of anti-gift. The original victims should always pass the “losing” to someone they are able to, otherwise the accumulated negative emotions caused by continued failure will ruin their gaming experience. In such a situation, they are both victims and marauders, and such behaviours invisibly bring unfamiliar players together and eventually make connections. Besides, it is also possible that the victims combine to carry out direct revenge to the marauders. In this situation, the anti-gift system links the individuals and collectives by a social network. Compared with formal faction warfare, these looser coalitions show how malicious reciprocity can knit together temporary “ad hoc” communities that coalesce around particular incidents or trade routes.

The free collective anti-gift could also lead to the transfer revenge. It is similar to the behaviour of anti-PK in traditional PVP mechanism, which is a form of in-game player justice and often motivated by an overpopulation of in-game player killers. The transfer revengers may also be the victims of marauding. Instead of marauding others and passing on the malicious experience, victims engaged in transfer revenge not only take revenge on their marauders but also counter the marauding behaviours of other marauders. Transfer revengers do not eliminate the anti-gift cycle from passing on, but break the existing anti-gift network and generate a new branch of anti-gift behaviours. This behavior complicates the network formed by anti-gift, and also increases the tension between different factions of players, which in turn keeps giving them challenge and makes them engaged within the game. Even when these collectives are not engaged in the anti-gift cycle as participants, they could also serve as the third-party communities in society and influence the anti-gift behaviors of other individuals and collectives (Lowrey, Otnes and Ruth, 2004). Through these overlapping roles of marauder, victim and avenger, malicious reciprocity and anti-gift together produce a dense, conflict-driven form of social solidarity that is specific to the PVP cultures of MMORPGs.

6.8. Conclusion

This chapter introduces two typical social practices, virtual gift and anti-gift in MMORPGs, and examines how they shape social relationships. Part I focuses on virtual gifting in current MMORPGs. With the development of MMORPGs, virtual gifting has become an embedded social practice that carries both symbolic-cultural and economic meanings. Despite the intangibility of these virtual goods, consumers still perceive their value within specific gaming cultures. However, this sense of value is constantly challenged by real-world monetary measurement and the possibility of converting virtual items into priced commodities. The commercialization of virtual markets has shifted some consumers' orientations towards virtual gifts and encouraged more explicitly economic exchanges. Cognitive frictions between gift-oriented and market-

oriented valuations create a more complex field of virtual goods exchange, in which hybrid patterns of reciprocity emerge and in turn shape the construction and breakdown of social relationships.

In Part II, the concept of “anti-gift” is defined as a pattern composed of “marauding”, “losing” and “revenging” through which players earn experience, status and material rewards. Extending Hyde’s (1983) work, the chapter elaborates malicious reciprocity in MMORPG PVP and distinguishes three types of “revenge”. These forms of revenge sustain cycles of malicious reciprocity and affect the social relationships of players who participate in the anti-gift system as marauders, victims and avengers. Although it is driven by malicious purposes, anti-gift does not necessarily dissolve community; instead, it can promote community building, organise dense conflict-based social networks among players, and deepen their long-term engagement with the game world.

7. Phase III: NON-HUMAN AGENCY AND GIFTING NETWORK

7.1. Introduction

This chapter investigates the multifaceted influence of non-human agency and gifting networks in online games, drawing on findings from Phase III of the research. Phase III is based on in-depth interviews with MMORPG players, and the analysis in this chapter therefore remains grounded in players' own descriptions of gifting, anti-gifting and everyday play. Building on the prior chapter's analysis of digital gifts and anti-gifts, it delves deeper into the impact of market forces on the social environments of virtual worlds. By examining both macro and micro perspectives, the chapter explores how commercialization permeates online games, influencing gift economies, social structures, and player interactions. Central to this investigation are two primary dimensions of agency: the "world agency" of game producers and the "object agency" of non-human entities, and how these dimensions intersect with the gift, anti-gift and hybrid exchange practices identified in Chapters 5 and 6. Game producers, acting as creators and market agents, impose rules and policies that shape the virtual world's dynamics. Their actions, whether fostering community engagement or prioritizing profit, have far-reaching effects on the gifting economy and player behavior. In parallel, non-human entities, including avatars, NPCs, and virtual items, are examined as active participants in the virtual ecosystem. These entities influence players through their autonomy and object-oriented capacities, fostering interactions that reshape traditional human-centered social networks. The chapter also introduces the concept of objective reciprocity, where players engage in meaningful exchanges with non-human entities. These interactions, often perceived as more genuine and less complex than human relationships, highlight the evolving role of non-human agents in virtual worlds. By integrating market forces and object agency, the chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of how online games create hybrid social systems that challenge conventional

understandings of social networks and reciprocity, while preparing the ground for the more formal theoretical synthesis developed in Chapter 8.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, the concept of “world agency” is introduced, focusing on the role of game producers as agents of the virtual world and the market. This section explores how producers influence the virtual world through game design, rule implementation, and policy decisions. Throughout, the discussion remains centred on concrete MMORPG practices, showing how specific design choices and operational strategies reshape gifting, anti-gifting and hybrid exchanges. Next, the chapter shifts to “object agency”, analyzing the role of non-human entities in the virtual world and examining three key components: avatars, game items, and NPCs. The discussion emphasizes how these entities possess autonomy, authority, and agency, enabling them to shape player experiences and interactions. Following this, the chapter introduces the concept of “objective reciprocity”, where interactions between players and non-human entities offer meaningful and less complex alternatives to human relationships. Finally, the chapter concludes by synthesizing these themes, demonstrating how the interplay between human and non-human agency creates hybrid social systems in online games. The findings underscore the transformative potential of non-human entities in shaping virtual worlds, challenging traditional notions of social interaction and reciprocity in digital environments.

7.2. The agency of “World”

In the online gaming market, game producers are considered to be a unique entity. Typically, producers are responsible for designing the game's structure, including its settings and characters. They test their game concepts, prioritize player needs, determine the target audience for the game's design, and provide overarching guidance for daily management (Chandler, 2009). Game producers determine the content and direction of an online game product. Previous literature on the online gaming world has often excluded the game operators from research targets. For example, Prax (2015) pointed out that treating the providers of online services as actors in the virtual online

community is a conflation of real-life and online behavior. However, when considering the interaction between online communities and markets, examining their roles in the context of online gaming from various dimensions can provide a better understanding of their impact on online gaming.

From the perspective of the virtual world, the role of game producers is similar to that of a “creator” within the “parallel universe” of the online gaming market. They possess a higher level of authority in the virtual world, capable of shaping its development and trajectory. Players often refer to them as the “will of the world” (O'Donnell, 2014). As one participant described, *“Game producers are the managers of the virtual world, the spokespersons of the world. For us, they are not perceived as mere inhabitants of this world; they seem to transcend it.”*

From the standpoint of the real market, game producers function as both producers and sellers. They inherently possess commercial attributes, driven by a motivation for balanced reciprocity and profit. Their role determines their affinity with the market. Thus, when the focus shifts to the internal dynamics of online gaming, game producers appear to be directly influenced by the market and in turn, influence the characters within the online gaming world.

When these two perspectives are combined, the role of game producers in the virtual world takes on a new significance. In general, game producers can be seen as agents of the market in the virtual world. Under the influence of the market, they possess the agency to cater to market needs and influence the virtual world (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In this chapter, this dual position is captured by the notion of “world agency”, which highlights how producers simultaneously speak for the market and for the game world when they make design and governance decisions.

In fact, in the history of online gaming development, game producers have indeed demonstrated the agency of the world. In Section 5.2.3, we described the phenomenon of the “update paradox,” which can be attributed to the decisions made by game producers. A typical example is the change in item binding in online games. In the early

stages of online gaming, most virtual items were freely tradable and not bound to characters. However, as online gaming evolved, some virtual items (such as equipment and rare items) were given the “Bind-on-Equip” (BOE) attribute, meaning that once an avatar equipped or used the item, it became bound to that specific avatar. Subsequently, many items obtained from raids became “Bind-on-Pick” (BOP), automatically binding to the avatar upon acquisition (ErkenBrack, 2009). Such changes affected the circulation of certain items in the virtual world and disrupted the exchange of gifts between old and new players. As previously described, initially, gifts were primarily the result of spontaneous goodwill exchanges between players. However, with game updates, these encouraged social interactions gradually became more difficult to sustain and, in many cases, history.

While impeding the passing on of gifts, the shift from free trade to BOE and BOP has specific commercial implications. Our informant, Hemiko, a game designer, shared his firsthand experience of the transition of item attributes from free trade to BOE and BOP:

“Frankly, the initial motivation behind this change was to generate revenue and increase user stickiness. At that time, many games in the market made this change because it was tied to the item charging system, not solely reliant on selling point cards but on selling in-game items... Our team's original intention was to encourage players to not solely obtain top-tier equipment through virtual or real currency transactions. We hoped to incentivize their active participation in the game, rather than solely relying on financial capabilities to solve avatar build issues. When they invest enough time, game duration and activity increase, our metrics look better, and we can attract more funding... As a result, we found that a large number of mercenary teams, or so-called gold teams, emerged in the game. Many players may not want to participate or may not have the necessary skills, so they choose to join these teams to have others carry them through raids and bid for equipment.”

From Hemiko's description, it is evident that the game development team's decision

to implement this update was in response to market demands, with profit being the primary objective. Simultaneously, they also aimed to enhance player engagement within the game product. However, similar to other online gaming products, the outcome of their change was the emergence of numerous gold teams in the game. This measure not only disrupted the previously free-trade gaming environment but also exacerbated the invasion of capital into the virtual world, subsequently leading to the emergence and development of real-money trading (RMT) in the virtual world. When examining this phenomenon from within the virtual world, players who embody the perspective of their avatars naturally perceive a change in the world's rules, leading to internal environmental shifts. However, the virtual and real worlds are inherently interconnected. Some consumers may resist changes in the online gaming environment, viewing game producers as agents of the market economy and attributing them responsibility for the impact on the virtual world. In such instances, the market's influence is seen as negative, and the updates may paradoxically become counterproductive. In terms of this thesis, these dynamics show how world agency can unintentionally weaken generalized reciprocity around gifts and prepare the ground for more instrumental, hybrid forms of exchange.

Compared to the profit-driven policies of certain game developers, some online game producers attempt to downplay their role as agents in order to bridge the gap with consumers by altering their public image. This strategy aims to foster a more egalitarian and inclusive relationship, thereby enhancing consumer trust and loyalty towards the game producer. By diminishing the prominence of their agent identity, game producers seek to emphasize a shared interest with players, promoting more positive and intimate interactions. This approach reflects a shift towards a more consumer-centric and empathetic engagement model in the gaming industry. Previous research has also confirmed that in order for the digital consumer network to continue generating innovative ideas, it is essential for the interests and incentives of both producers and consumers to be aligned (Lerner & Tirole, 2002). These game producers often strive to

downplay their role as senior management of the game company, instead opting to engage with consumers in a more grassroots manner as fellow players.

For example, in *Final Fantasy XIV*, there exists an independent NPC called the “*Wandering Minstrel*”. According to the in-game lore, the Wandering Minstrel “comes from 'outside'” and makes regular appearances in the game's main city during anniversary celebrations to provide guidance and assistance to players. However, the true identity of this NPC is that of the game's producer, Naoki Yoshida, in the game world. Yoshida personally donned attire resembling the in-game character at *FF14*'s anniversary offline celebrations in early years to confirm this (Figure 21). During online live streams, he often uses an avatar with the same appearance as the NPC to engage in raid activities with players in the game. Players affectionately refer to him as “*Yoshi-P*” or “*小吉*” (Xiǎo Jí). Throughout the extensive development of *FF14*, Yoshida's online live streams have become a platform for players to interact closely with the development team. Players actively participate in discussions with Yoshi-P and offer suggestions for the future development of the *FF14* game world and its community. This resonates with the point made by Araki & Lang (2007) that consumers who are intrinsically motivated actively participate in and contribute to online community network tasks, as they enjoy topical challenges, gain status and reputation, experience ego gratification, and may even receive future job offers (Araki & Lang, 2007).



Figure 21 Naoki Yoshida and his in-game persona “Wandering Minstrel”

Source: Official promotional image from the *Final Fantasy XIV* global website.

Based on the role positioning of producers in the virtual world, their function as market agents in managing market influence within the virtual world demonstrates unique differences. Players' perceptions of the value of gifts largely stem from variances in their own awareness of the social and cultural backgrounds within the virtual world. In this context, conventional currency, as a classic measuring system, becomes a more straightforward and intuitive form of value. However, propelled by the commercialization of the market within the virtual world, the assessment of the value of virtual items has in turn become a catalyst for triggering cognitive disparities among players regarding “monetary or non-monetary” stances. As mentioned in Section 6.4, traditional players in *FF14* have shown resistance and opposition to Real Money Trading (RMT). They reject measuring the value of virtual items purely in monetary terms and aim to maintain harmony within the game world environment and social network through generalized mutuality and reciprocity. In this regard, *FF14*'s world agency demonstrates a high degree of empathy reached with players. To address the conflict between non-monetary gaming styles and the inherent profitability of online

games as products, the *FF14* officials have adjusted the world rules. The official definition of Real Money Trading (RMT) encompasses “establishing circulation between real-world currency and virtual currency,” which includes “the buying and selling of virtual currency by consumers” and “using real-world currency to purchase in-game items” (Korkeila & Hamari, 2020). This behavior is considered a violation that disrupts the in-game order, and players found engaging in such activities will have their accounts suspended in accordance with the rules. By formulating corresponding in-game trading strategies, the spontaneous resistance of traditional players to RMT has been elevated to the rules of the virtual world. Through the joint advocacy and implementation of in-game trading strategies by both officials and players, the economic balance and fairness within the virtual world are maintained. Players' interests are safeguarded, and the long-term development and prosperity of the game community are promoted (Quick, 2024). Simultaneously, in response to external market commercial demands, *FF14* has introduced a separate item mall detached from the in-game economic system. The items in the mall uniformly lack actual in-game attributes, thus not affecting the performance capabilities of avatars in the virtual world. These items typically consist of decorative attire and special effects, automatically binding to the purchased avatar upon acquisition. Furthermore, items in the game mall can also be gifted to other avatars, enhancing the diversity of objects as gifts (Figure 22). Due to their detachment from in-game items, players perceive shop items as “gifts exchanged in the virtual world under the guise of the real world.”

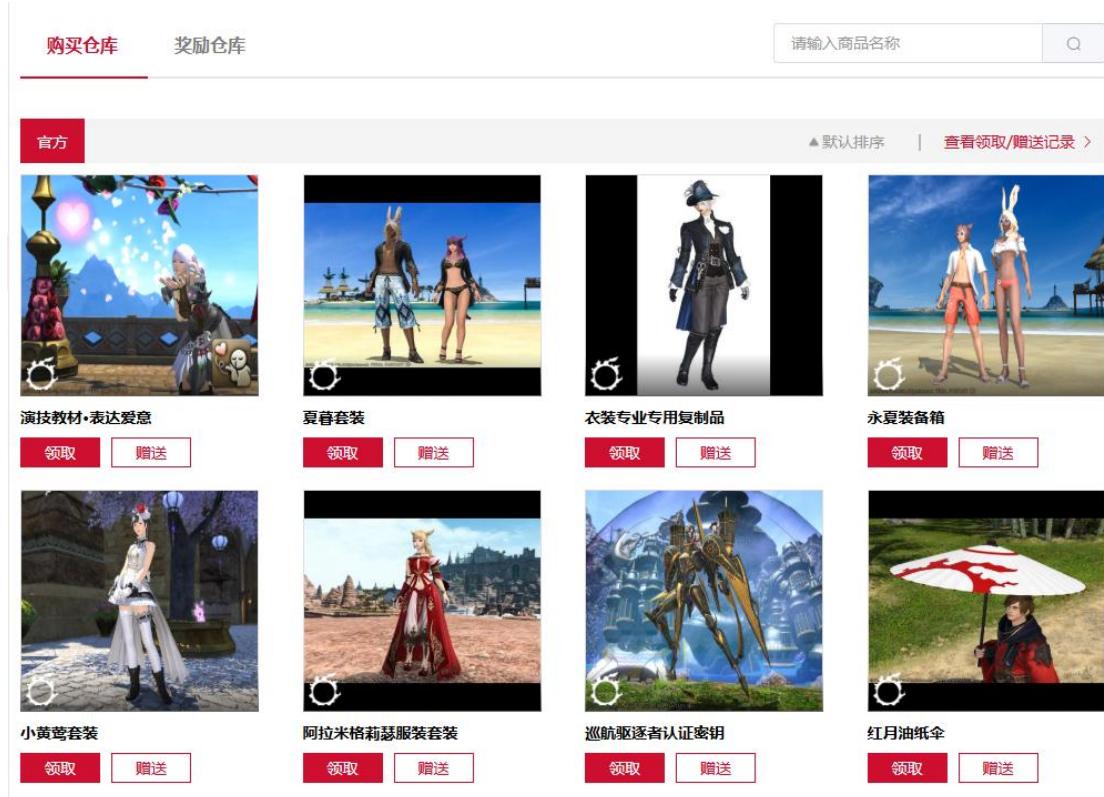


Figure 22 Receive & Give Interface of *FF14* Mall

Source: Researcher's own in-game screenshot from *Final Fantasy XIV*.

It is worth noting that world agency can manifest not only in positive forms but also in negative ones, although such behaviors are often not publicly displayed but rather revealed through players' experiences and specific incidents. One participant described a shill incident of a certain game product at the end of 2021 as follows:

“At the time, I ranked among the top 10 in overall combat power on the server. What does this entail? It means that I have invested at least millions of Chinese Yuan into each character in my game, totaling approximately tens of millions. To my knowledge, players at the top level like me had personalized one-on-one customer service, with dedicated staff overseeing recharge transactions, expenditures, and gathering feedback on game experiences. ... In regular gameplay, I would engage in PVP battles and guild wars with friends from the guild. This game revolves around the concept of pay-to-win, where spending money leads to strength, and being strong makes you more popular. ... Later on, I deleted my account, as the game producers

treated us as fools. Because we found that a top avatar had some items that would only be accessible in future game versions, indicating that he was undoubtedly a shill cultivated by the developers. In other words, his combat power was not acquired through personal spending but through covert manipulation by the officials. Normal players would surely find this unacceptable.”

The Anti-gift system exhibits a high degree of compatibility with the monetary game style. Within monetary online games, players have the opportunity to enhance the attributes of their avatars by purchasing virtual items from the in-game store using real currency, thereby enriching their gaming experience of marauding and seeking revenge in PVP scenarios. Concurrently, as their combat prowess increases, players can achieve elevated social status within the online community. It can be argued that with the encouragement of world agency towards PVP gaming activities, anti-gift behavior is further promoted. In this process, players gain reputation and status within specific online communities, leading to a collective trend towards marauding and seeking revenge, thus reinforcing solidarity among players in the virtual world. However, certain game producers have been observed to have a detrimental impact on the virtual world. They incentivize interactions involving anti-gift behavior by creating shill avatars, offering exclusive in-game items as targets for marauding, and guiding shills to integrate into players' daily anti-gifting networks (Peng, 2022). When the negative consequences of world agency's actions are identified, the repercussions on online social networks and player engagement can be severe, potentially resulting in societal fragmentation and permanent player attrition.

7.3. The agency of “non-human entities”

While game producers influence the online world through changes in game design direction and rules, they also subtly impact consumers' experiences in the virtual gaming world, with the medium of this influence being the entities in the virtual world other than consumers. In Chapter 2, we identified the components of MMORPGs, including avatars, game items, and NPCs. These elements can be seen as non-human

entities that players interact with in the virtual world. Their interactions with players in the virtual world create a network between human and non-human entities, providing diversity in interactions. Avatars and NPCs, as virtual representations of humans in the virtual world, also contribute to the social systems experienced by players in online games. In this section, we will elaborate on the influence of these three components on players. This includes interactions between consumers through avatar-based interactions and between avatars and NPCs. Throughout this process, both NPCs and virtual objects demonstrate their agency and autonomy, with NPCs exerting a certain level of authority over objects. In line with the broader focus of this thesis, these non-human entities are not merely technical infrastructure but act as participants in the networks of gifting, hybrid exchange and anti-gift that organise social life in MMORPGs, and thus function as actants in the MMORPG gifting networks traced in this study.

7.3.1. Consumer and avatar

The relationship between consumer and avatar is central in our discussion. In the early stage of online games, consumers simply created their avatars, named them, and used them to explore the virtual world. The combination of ID and avatar body formed a player's online social identity. At this stage, players had already experienced that they gradually not only became reembodied but increasingly identified as their avatars (Binark and Su“tcu”, 2009; Taylor, 2002), but the 2D third-person perspective interface weakened their sense of immersion. This problem was compensated for in subsequent MMORPGs. Such products as *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* took the lead in adopting the first-person game mode and greatly expanded the freedom of avatar customization on the basis of the original creation. The player was not just placed into an alternate avatar body any more, as they could now have some choice in selecting, modifying, and accessorizing their representation (Bryant and Akerman 2009). As pointed out by Bartle (2004), players are their avatars in the process of online games. The resonance between a consumer's personal characteristics and those of the avatar

determines the extent to which the consumer becomes immersed in the online game.

Regarding the consumer-avatar relationship, one of the insights in previous research is that avatar is controlled by the consumer (Banks & Bowman 2013). Previous research has also shown that the character of a player's avatar may become more and more integrated into the player's sense of self (Bryant and Akerman 2009; Fox, Bailenson and Tricase 2013), underlining the effects of avatars have on consumers. However, this stream of research is anthropocentric and is largely based on the notion of the extended self in digital space (Belk 2013). From an object-oriented ontology perspective, avatar will also affect consumers in this relationship. Although players regard avatars as part of their self, it has to be admitted that avatars are essentially virtual objects built from computer code. MMORPGs provide a more visual and aural means of representing consumers in avatars, along with more intelligent mechanisms as simplification of operations and protection, thus the current avatars may be more independent than what has been documented in previous research (Yee 2006, 2013; Belk 2013, 2014). Object-oriented ontology argues that objects may have agency, autonomy and authority. Digital possessions like avatars and other virtual objects may have their own 'will' and behave autonomously in virtual environment (Hoffman and Novak 2018). This object-oriented ontology provides a novel perspective to reconsider consumer-avatar relationship.

Agency

An object-oriented ontological perspective emphasizes the agency of avatar rather than consumers' efforts in extending their senses of self, as seen in the following case, in which Leaf described her experiences of how gaming changed her real life:

Sometimes you must follow your avatar's choices...At the time, my avatar was a priest, a common "healer" in online games. I loved the gaming style of being a healer. But in fact, I am not good at socializing in real life, and I try to avoid communicating with others. Another gaming style of my avatar was using potions or poisons as an assassin instead, but I didn't like that way of gaming, so I thought I could stick with

being a silent healer. However, the truth is, without communicating with others, paying attention to their situation, and healing them, I can't play this game anymore. ...During the gaming process I have become more and more outgoing and it has also changed my real life.

In this example, the player does not seek to extend her sense of self into the virtual world or to actively construe a different self as previous research may have described (Belk 2013). Rather, the player “follows the avatar’s choices”, which are preprogrammed and to certain extent autonomous. The self-transformation Leaf experienced in her daily life is a result from the interactions her avatar had with other avatars. The gameplay of priest avatar made Leaf more communicative. In fact, not only is the player manipulating avatar, avatar is also influencing the player's behavior. Leaf’s account shows how the joint efforts between avatars and the human subject define the interplay between an individual’s desired and undesired selves (e.g., priest: peaceful versus assassin: invasive). The changes Leaf experienced are largely the result of influences from her avatars rather than the other way round.

It is easier to explain the effect between avatar and consumer from the perspective of onlooker. Mutual communications in the virtual world often begins with the interaction between avatars rather than the players, as other players usually see avatar first and then meet the owner. When players match avatar with its owner, they will have a specific consideration, that is, whether this avatar is suitable for this person, instead of considering whether this person is suitable for the avatar. One of the feelings that people often mention in online games is called “disharmony”. In this case, the sense of disharmony is reflected in the mismatch between avatar and its owner’s performance. Especially when tensions occur between players, the blames are usually sentencing like “This avatar is not for you.” or “Do not insult the role.”, rather than “You are not fit to your avatar.”. Discourses that share the same result actually have different starting points, as people judge the match degree of players from the perspective of avatar, the virtual object, instead of matching avatars from the perspective of players. Therefore,

the generation of this sense of disharmony lies in whether the influence of avatar is effective for players.

Autonomy

The autonomy is marked by a clear sense that avatar may have a life of its own. It is largely related to the computer intelligence of the avatar and other virtual objects with which the avatar is interacting. In the online gaming world, avatar may not only obey the player's command but also have its own actions. Schultze and Leahy (2009) describe a case of avatar autonomy in which an avatar automatically sat and waited for the player when she left the game to do something in real life. This suggests that avatars could have awareness experience. Even consumer is away from keyboard (also called AFK), the avatar could still act on their own. Besides, avatars can interact independently with the non-player characters (NPCs), the virtual objects, and other avatars without consumers' intervention on specific occasions. Such interactions may have an effect on the status of either/both entities. Ling shared her experience with NPC in *JX3*:

Interactions with NPCs" are always expectant as the effects of them are unknown before encounter. For instance, when I returned to the guild during festivals, the guild guards greeted me warmly and gave me a red envelope (gift). I would also give gifts to them (i.e., the guild guards) automatically. Then the "intimacy" value between me and them in the game increased.

In Ling's narrative, the "I" refers to her avatar and from an object-oriented ontological perspective, the avatar also affects the player based on preprogramed tactics. Notably, the actions of her avatar during these processes were performed autonomously. Avatar automatically engaged in gift giving to the guild guards to increase the intimacy value without the player's interference. The avatar in this case may expand the player's gaming experiences. In other words, interactions may be automatically unfolded rather than fully controlled by consumers, ultimately affecting other avatars, the accumulation of digital possessions, and the experience of the players as well.

Authority

Although avatars are virtual items controlled and operated by the player, the stance may be reversed in certain situation, in which avatar may express its authority and dominate consumer in turn. Players no longer distinguish between themselves and their avatars at the most extreme level of immersion of online games (Eladhari 2007). The excessive attachment and Immersion of them can also cause a loss of themselves in the virtual world, which is described as the “Internet addiction”. The game process has not only become a part of their daily leisure, but has gradually taken up a large part of their real life. Donkey was once troubled with Internet addiction and he shared his experience as follows:

At that time, I was completely fascinated by the game and felt that there was always something to do. It seemed that I was not me anymore, but the character of my avatar in the game setting. “I” was an extremely powerful warrior in the virtual world, and only in this environment could I experience the sense of truth. Even when I went to work, I would daydream to imagine that If I were as omnipotent as my avatar, I could become chivalric and accomplish a lot of things, such as punishing the guilty and saving the world, etc. ...I also tried to quit Internet addiction by selling my account or even deleting my avatar. But it didn’t work at all as I always quickly created or bought a new one. ...When I didn’t got an built avatar in the game, I felt I was going to “die” and I couldn’t catch my existence. But when I continued my game process, I just cannot control myself to substitute my imagination into various scenes of reality.

It can be seen that avatar realizes its authority to Donkey to some extent in this case. The influence of avatar is so strong that the affected consumer became immersed in the virtual character setting and cannot extricate himself in the virtual world, thus affecting his real life. Avatar is not merely a digital extended self of the consumer in such relationship. It seems that the consumer has become an extension of his avatar in real life, as he fantasizes that he becomes his avatar, inherits its character setting and continues to show the personality. When the contact with avatar is cut off in some ways,

consumer will feel that he has lost himself.

Instead of simply extending one's sense of self into an avatar, consumers are also affected by the avatar that exerts agency and thereby contributes to the joint identity project. While an anthropocentric perspective projects human characteristics onto avatars, an object-oriented perspective recognizes that, rather than being only representations of consumers that passively have meaning invested in them (Belk, 1988), avatars can express an agentic role through interactions just as consumers do. This also resonates with Hoffman and Novak's (2018) conceptualization that "objects exist independent of consumers' interactions with them" (Hoffman & Novak, 2018, p. 1198), which indicates that smart objects can exist as parts of consumer-object assemblages with their own unique capacities. In the context of MMORPG gifting and anti-gift, this means that the avatar is both a vehicle for players' intentions and a semi-autonomous actant that mediates how generosity, hybrid reciprocity and hostile exchanges are displayed, interpreted and remembered in everyday play.

7.3.2. Avatar and game item

In the avatar-mediated environment of online games, avatars and game items are both regarded as the virtual possessions of consumers. The game items are neither fully owned nor merely accessed (Molesworth et al. 2016). They are owned indirectly by the consumers through the medium of avatar. In the last section we have discussed the virtual object capacities of avatar in the consumer-object relationship. Similarly, from a non-anthropocentric perspective, game items also have object agency to the extent that they possess the ability for interaction, having the capacity to affect and be affected (Franklin and Graesser 1996). Avatar is the extension and representation of players' sense of self. During the game process, when avatars equip and use items that are seen through a first-person perspective on the screen, players often regard such behaviours are taken by themselves. Hoffman and Novak (2018) point out that object-object interactions indirectly impact consumer experience since they may affect subsequent consumer-centric interactions. In MMORPG, the relationship between avatars and game items could be regarded as an object-object relationship. The agency of game

items mainly lies in helping constantly enrich avatar performance.

Avatar in the virtual world is usually judged by the avatar stats, which is mainly related to the functional items, especially equipment. Equipment is employed to enhance the ability of avatars, and high-level equipment could make avatars who equip them be more powerful in game activities. Experienced players can judge the performance of avatars by their equipment level, and those avatars that have high gear may be more popular and famous in the gaming world. Moreover, this object-object interaction will also contribute to further consumer-centric relationships. As the top equipment are often rare and hard to get, successful acquisition reflects the fact that the players of these avatars are professional, so that these players can gain social status in online community.

Non-functional items will also affect the judgement from others. In online games, players use items like clothing and decorations to shape the avatar looks. The large number of accessories contribute to a wide variety of outward appearance, which, as in real life, result in different interpersonal attraction. Avatars with high outward attractiveness are often more popular and help their owners gain higher social status (Lo 2008). Besides, non-functional items also help to express self-identity, as some details of appearance may reflect the characteristics of players expressed intentionally or unintentionally through their avatars, such as their gender, personality and so on.

When things come to some consumption items and usage collection items, the object agency is more obvious. These items could be ‘used’ by avatars to obtain temporary status. Examples are foods and potions, both of which could help avatars restore health and give them a temporary beneficial effect (called buff), as well as magic scrolls that transforms the avatars into animals or other species. The possession of such items may be more temporary than those of other kinds, but they provide as much effect as other kinds of props to avatars and consumers.

Game items in online games therefore exert their agency primarily through object-object interactions with avatars. As these interactions extend into subsequent

consumer-object relationships, they attach value to players and help them gain status and prestige (Wang, Zhao, and Bamossy 2009), articulate identity (Bryant and Akerman 2009), and increase their attractiveness to others (Belk 2013). Although such items are only temporarily owned and indirectly carried by consumers, players still invest significant time and resources to acquire and accumulate these virtual goods as part of building their avatars. Within MMORPG gifting networks, the same objects circulate as gifts, balanced returns, or targets of anti-gift, so their object agency also mediates how generosity, obligation, and hostile taking are materialized and remembered within the ANT-style configurations of human and non-human actants discussed in this thesis.

7.3.3. Avatar and NPC

In terms of game mechanics, non-human characters are set to interact with players. The interactions between avatar and NPC are not limited to the basic game functions of NPC, such as simple conversations, actions, and trading, but also often involve the capacities conferred on avatars in particular situations. For instance, a hermit NPC may give a temporary buff to the avatar before the avatar takes any action. NPCs' interactions may unfold automatically rather than passively triggered, which not only has some effect on avatars but may also form an emotional connection to consumers.

Seed described her feeling about an NPC in *Final Fantasy XIV*:

I will never forget the moment when my best friend Haurchefant, an NPC in the game, blocked the arrow for me. I thought I had to die once and continue my game, but I didn't realize that he traded his life for mine. At that time, I, an adult player, was sitting in front of a computer, staring at the screen and crying like a child.

Seed's feeling indicates how deep the effect of NPC's automatic interaction could be on players. Recent research on AI companions and non-player characters in digital environments similarly shows that scripted but contingent NPC interventions can elicit strong attachment, empathy and even grief responses among players (e.g., Hu et al., 2025; Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022). Along with the development of MMORPGs, NPC characters have gradually evolved from objects providing functions

and interaction to more complex forms of artificial intelligence that increase the immersion of players. NPCs are linked to the avatar closely by the game story, as these characters, especially the key figures in the plot, often have frequent interactions with players. Despite their digital essence as computer data, NPCs are regarded as living “people” in the virtual world, rather than pure possessions. Accompanied with the plot advancement, connections as well as fetters are established between them and players. Even for some players that tend to play MMORPG as single-player games, NPCs are the “social members” they communicate with in the virtual environment. In this consumer-object relationship, regardless of belongings, players will still cherish their existence, and feel sad for their departure or death in the story.

NPC could also help to build relationships between consumers. As “friends” and “social members”, they interact with players in the course of the game and become the same nodes in different players’ social network. In the in-game or out-of-game online community, players will spontaneously post topics associated with them. Such topics bring players who do not know each other together in the same story discussion or support activities and form a social connection between them.

The essence of the constraint and influence of NPCs on players is the agency of the game system. From the viewpoint of computer science, the setting of NPCs is part of the game software, and the gaming system determines their logical functions. They may have their own agency, autonomy and authority, but also represent a part of the gaming system in a broader sense. Thus, the functions and behaviors of NPCs have a deeper meaning, as the gaming system they represent are actually involved in avatars’ everyday tasks released by NPCs, through which the gaming system may encourage or limit the behaviours of players. Such influence could be regarded as a form of system-level agency that, in the ANT configuration developed in this thesis, participates in shaping how quests, rewards and constraints circulate through networks of avatars, NPCs and players across the whole virtual world.

7.4. Human-object interaction and objective reciprocity

Recognizing the agency of the world and non-human entities allows us to further explore how consumers navigate their lifestyles within virtual worlds. The mutual interaction between humans and objects has reshaped how players engage with social networks in these environments, reflecting the diversification of social and individual behaviors within virtual gaming contexts. As online games gain popularity, an increasing number of players tend to approach them as single-player experiences, opting to participate in social activities selectively rather than conforming to the social imperatives traditionally embedded in multiplayer games. One of our participants, Doloop, explained her thoughts on making online games a stand-alone game:

“Honestly, I have some social anxiety. The complexities and exhaustion of real-world relationships are already overwhelming for me. In games, I want to steer clear of the calculated and pressurized interactions common in social settings. As a story-driven player, I derive my greatest joy from engaging with NPCs, adventuring with them, communicating, and completing tasks. I’m deeply immersed in these virtual worlds, exploring the backstories of each character, feeling their emotions, and connecting with them. This kind of experience makes me feel like I’m conversing with the ‘world’ itself, rather than interacting with real people. ...This playstyle frees me from being influenced by others’ pacing, worrying about holding teammates back, or compromising my will to fit a team. I can explore the world my way, enjoy the scenery, solve puzzles, or take on challenges without external interference.”

As noted earlier, the dynamics of online games are undergoing significant transformations under the mutual influence of social and market forces. While some players continue to embrace traditional social exchanges, others increasingly gravitate toward interactions with non-human entities. These interactions are valued for their purity and sincerity, standing apart from the complexities of real-world social dynamics. Non-human entities, such as NPCs or environmental elements, are free from real-world social conflicts, manipulation, or betrayals. This makes them low-risk and high-reward

partners for exploration and task completion, allowing players to focus on immersive experiences without the potential stressors of human relationships. In gifting terms, these encounters resemble simplified exchanges where attention, time and narrative progress are “given” and “returned” without the debt, obligation or status games that accompany many human interactions.

This preference also sheds new light on the debates surrounding gift and market systems in virtual societies. Consumers often turn away from human-human communication in favor of engaging with relationships constructed between avatars and non-human entities. As objects and non-human entities become increasingly intelligent, they can deliver interactions that rival, or even surpass, those found in human social contexts. For instance, in specific virtual circumstances where MMORPGs fail to provide clear social stratification, players frustrated by the pressures of hybrid gift-market exchanges and hybrid reciprocity may turn to alternative forms of interaction with non-human entities. Doloop’s description vividly illustrates the sense of relief players experience when interacting with non-human entities. These interactions, characterized by their purity and sincerity, transcend the limitations of traditional interpersonal engagements. The relationships between players and non-human entities are built on shared understanding of rules, narrative contexts, and task systems rather than relying on the nuanced and often unpredictable dynamics of human emotional and psychological factors. In such exchanges, non-human entities offer clear and genuine responses that fulfill players’ intrinsic needs.

In Section 6.4, we discussed the traits of hybrid exchanges and hybrid reciprocity, particularly the principle that “to give is more preferred than to receive.” We highlighted that givers often demonstrate generalized giving, while receiving and reciprocating tend to involve a balance that can impose a sense of obligation on both parties due to potential differences in perspective and intention. However, when the target of interaction shifts to non-human entities, this psychological burden is significantly alleviated, and the interaction moves closer to a one-sided, low-stakes

giving of attention and care. NPCs, as reliable virtual companions, often serve as consistent and dependable partners. Unlike human entities, their interactions lack the complexities of interpersonal conflict, such as betrayal, misunderstandings, or power dynamics. This makes them particularly appealing to players, especially those with social anxiety or who find real-world social relationships exhausting.

It is worth emphasizing that intelligent non-human entities are designed to simulate emotional and cognitive capabilities, thereby creating highly immersive experiences. These interactions can rival traditional human exchanges and, in certain scenarios, even surpass them. For instance, NPCs' narrative guidance and quest development enable players to achieve a sense of accomplishment and belonging without involving the intricacies of social dynamics. For some players, this experience embodies the inclusivity and adaptability of the virtual world, offering a meaningful alternative to traditional social environments. In this context, a new form of social relationship between players and NPCs emerges, rooted in objective reciprocity. This concept encapsulates the reciprocal interactions between humans and non-human entities, transcending the traditional notion of objects as tools controlled by humans. Instead, it emphasizes the agency (ability to act), autonomy (capacity for independent action), and authority (role as arbiters or guides) of non-human entities within virtual environments. In line with Object-Oriented Ontology (Hoffman & Novak, 2018) and the ANT perspective, NPCs are not mere programmed agents but active participants in the virtual world. Their agency is evident in how they shape narratives, their autonomy in responding to player actions, and their authority in guiding and arbitrating tasks. These characteristics elevate NPCs to a quasi-subject status, making them indispensable "social presences" in players' experiences.

In MMORPGs, objective reciprocity manifests through complex interactions between players, NPCs, and virtual objects. A notable example can be found in *World of Warcraft*, where players enhance NPC favorability by offering gifts, leading to rewards such as unlocking new storylines, acquiring rare items, or accessing exclusive

quests. This reciprocity transcends conventional task mechanics by embodying principles of human-like reciprocity while avoiding the emotional complexities and risks associated with real-world relationships. NPCs' responses often carry unique qualities tied to their narratives or personalities. For example, specific gifts may elicit personalized dialogue or symbolic items as responses, deepening the player's sense of recognition and appreciation, thus amplifying immersion and meaning. Moreover, NPCs' gifts often serve as emotional bridges, enabling players to connect more deeply with their backstories, personalities, and emotions. These exchanges enrich the narrative depth of the game world and foster a sense of relationship progression between players and NPCs. For story-driven players, such emotional feedback is invaluable as it fulfills their need for emotional engagement and enhances the realism of the virtual world. From a gift-exchange perspective, these patterned sequences of offering, recognition and further giving operate as human-NPC circuits of objective reciprocity that parallel, rather than replace, the human-human gifting and anti-gift cycles mapped in Chapter 6.

The distinctive nature of objective reciprocity lies in the dynamic intermediary role played by NPCs. Their actions are neither fully controlled by players nor entirely independent of game rules; instead, they represent a balance designed to create meaningful interactions. Through structured feedback mechanisms, such as delivering rewards or advancing narratives, NPCs offer players a low-pressure yet deeply rewarding form of social interaction. This design allows players to engage in relationships that blend functionality with emotional depth, fostering satisfaction without the burden of real-world social expectations. In MMORPG virtual societies, objective reciprocity redefines the relationship between humans and virtual objects. By endowing NPCs with agency and autonomy, players perceive them not as mere tools or background elements but as social entities within the virtual community. These relationships bridge functional and emotional dimensions, satisfying players' desires for clear goals and accomplishments while reshaping their understanding of reciprocity

within controlled yet meaningful frameworks, which sit alongside the more demanding hybrid reciprocity and malicious reciprocity that structure human-human exchanges in MMORPG gifting networks.

7.5. “No Game, No Life”

During our interviews, many respondents referenced a common phrase when discussing the relationship between online games and their real lives: “No Game, No Life.” This simple yet profound statement reflects not only the importance of online games in players' lives but also the deep integration of these games into the fabric of modern living. Online games have transcended the realm of mere entertainment to become an indispensable part of life for many players. By engaging in virtual worlds, players escape the pressures and inequalities of reality, while also experiencing fairness, achievement, and a sense of belonging in a structured environment. Over time, these virtual spaces have evolved from temporary refuges into “second lives,” where players express their identities, build social networks, and explore their potential.

However, the meaning of a gaming life goes beyond this. One of our participants, Fane, shared how online games have become an irreplaceable part of his daily routine. He explained:

“At the end of every MMORPG expansion, I've maxed out my gear, cleared all the dungeons, and experienced every piece of current content, sometimes even reaching the pinnacle of the game. One day, you realize there's no goal left, nothing to do. Yet, logging in daily still remains part of my schedule. Honestly, opening the game isn't about accomplishing anything; it's just about opening the game itself. Like eating or sleeping, it's become a habit.”

For many players, this habit transcends mere repetition of behavior. It fulfills a psychological need, offering stability and security. Even after all objectives have been achieved, the virtual world remains a place where they feel anchored. In ANT terms, the game client, avatar and routine tasks form a relatively stable assemblage that gives players a predictable rhythm of interaction, even when progression-oriented goals have

already been exhausted.

As the commercialization of virtual worlds advanced, the utopian purity of early online games was eroded by market forces. The emergence of hybrid exchange altered the simple reciprocal relationships that once defined these spaces. Yet, as Fane's experience illustrates, players still chose to remain. This choice is not merely a compromise but an active adaptation to the coexistence of virtual and real possibilities. While the commercialized virtual world has diluted the ideals of early gaming equality, it has also introduced frameworks that mirror real-world social structures, allowing players to continue crafting their identities and narratives within familiar rules. The appeal of virtual worlds lies not in their perfection but in their malleability. Players can choose to engage with environments that reflect real-world social dynamics while maintaining autonomy from their real-life backgrounds. As discussed in section 7.3.1, some players view online games as both "a projection of reality" and "an extension of an ideal world." This dual identity enables them to explore and practice in virtual spaces, fulfilling psychological needs and achieving a reinforced sense of identity, even when those practices involve ambivalent forms of hybrid reciprocity that mix generosity, calculation and status-seeking.

For those disillusioned by hybrid exchanges, non-human entities (NPCs) within virtual worlds have become vital components of their social networks. Interaction with NPCs offers players emotional connections that are free from the burdens of real-world relationships. These bonds are rooted in trust and immersion rather than profit or obligation. As one respondent noted, "The companionship of NPCs makes this world feel real, not like a battlefield full of calculations and manipulation." For those dealing with social anxiety or isolation, such interactions act as both a refuge and a bridge, helping them find emotional support and rebuild trust in interpersonal relationships. This is where objective reciprocity becomes most visible: players repeatedly "give" time, attention and narrative effort to NPCs and, in return, receive recognition, story development and symbolic gifts without being drawn into the debt, comparison and

potential conflict that accompany many human-human exchanges.

At the same time, anti-gift behaviors further highlight the complexity and diversity of virtual social dynamics. Unlike the constraints of real-world social norms and ethics, anti-gifts and malicious reciprocity can be freely enacted in virtual worlds through the affordances of specific game mechanics. These behaviors, often amplifying player tensions, emphasize the multifaceted and competitive nature of these digital spaces. For example, some players, frustrated by repeated anti-gift acts, have organized anti-plunder guilds to counter malicious actors and provide a safeguard for new or vulnerable players. These collective responses showcase not only the adversarial aspects of virtual societies but also the emergent cooperation and solidarity driven by shared challenges. As Section 6.6 elaborates, such interactions reveal the dynamic interplay between conflict and collaboration, underscoring the resilience and adaptability of player communities. As one participant insightfully noted, “Games allow us to navigate both collaboration and conflict without real-world constraints, and these experiences profoundly enhance my understanding of teamwork and collective problem-solving.” In other words, marauding, revenge and counter-marauding are not only moments of malicious reciprocity but also catalysts through which factions, counter-guilds and wider networks cohere.

“No Game, No Life” is not just a declaration by players; it encapsulates how online games integrate into modern culture and shape their life philosophies. Games offer a means of escaping reality while simultaneously serving as a stage for participation, where players can rewrite their stories in a controlled environment. As Fane articulated:

“Because it’s just a game, it can’t offer the infinite possibilities of real life. But precisely because it’s a game, we can experience an entirely different story at minimal cost. That’s the meaning of gaming... That’s why I resonate with ‘No Game, No Life.’ Life is a game, and the game is life. I’ve never regretted all these years I’ve spent gaming. It’s helped me meet real friends and given me the chance to step outside my reality, to embark on a journey I’d never otherwise experience.”

Through low-risk experiences, online games provide players with diversity and opportunities often unattainable in real life. They enable the exploration of new identities, the building of genuine friendships, and the discovery of alternative life trajectories. As Fane described, gaming allowed him to “step outside the structure of reality” into a life he could fully control. For many, constrained by societal responsibilities and pressures, games offer a brief yet liberating escape, granting them the freedom to envision and embody idealized versions of themselves. The same gifting, anti-gift and human–object exchanges traced across Chapters 5 to 7 therefore become resources for experimenting with different selves and different moral positions, rather than remaining purely functional mechanisms for obtaining items or status.

This freedom extends beyond personal experiences, influencing broader gaming culture. The “second lives” crafted in virtual worlds increasingly intersect with real-world culture, creating new social phenomena. The social networks, cultural symbols, and identities forged in games have transcended the virtual space, becoming integral to contemporary society. This cultural interweaving further cements the role of games in players’ lives, elevating them beyond entertainment to symbols of modern culture.

“No Game, No Life” succinctly captures the dual essence of online games: they are both an escape from reality and a stage for recreating life. In games, players can momentarily transcend real-world inequalities and pressures while using creative identity expression and diverse social interactions to redefine their life trajectories. The allure of virtual worlds lies in their flexibility and immersion, whether adapting to hybrid exchanges, finding solace in NPC companionship, or confronting anti-gift challenges, players fulfill psychological and social needs within these spaces. For this reason, online games have evolved from simple pastimes into essential components of culture and identity. They are not merely fleeting diversions but central to modern life, offering opportunities to explore the diversity of existence and rewrite personal narratives in a relatively safe environment. Life is a game, and the game is life, a profound interconnection that underpins the indispensability of virtual worlds in the

lives of modern players.

7.6. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the transformative role of non-human agency and gifting networks in online games, revealing their influence on virtual social structures, player experiences, and market dynamics. Game producers, as “world agents,” play a pivotal role in shaping the rules and social frameworks of online worlds. Their decisions, driven by both commercial and community interests, significantly impact the evolution of gifting and anti-gifting behaviors. The examples of item-binding mechanics and player responses illustrate how market pressures shape social interactions and alter the balance between reciprocity and commercialization.

The agency of non-human entities, including avatars, NPCs and virtual items, emerges as a critical factor in the hybrid social systems of online games. Avatars enable players to explore and project identities, NPCs foster emotional connections through immersive narratives, and virtual items enhance status and interactions. These entities act not only as tools but also as active participants with autonomy, authority and agency, contributing to the dynamics of virtual ecosystems. Taken together, these non-human actants help configure how virtual gifts, hybrid exchanges and anti-gifts are performed, witnessed and remembered within the MMORPG gifting networks analyzed in this thesis.

The chapter also highlighted the concept of objective reciprocity, where interactions between players and non-human entities provide meaningful, low-pressure alternatives to human relationships. These exchanges, characterized by sincerity and emotional fulfillment, offer a reprieve from the complexities of real-world interactions. Rather than replacing human-to-human gift exchange, they sit alongside hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift as an additional way in which value, attachment and obligation circulate in virtual societies, particularly for players who prefer less socially taxing forms of engagement.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate the hybrid nature of virtual societies, where

market forces, human agency and non-human entities intersect to redefine social networks, gifting economies and identity construction within MMORPG worlds. From a gift-exchange perspective, recognizing non-human agency clarifies how generalized, balanced and malicious reciprocity are configured in practice, while an ANT-informed view highlights the shifting roles of human and non-human actants in these networks. By blending human and object agency, online games create spaces where players navigate complex social systems, explore alternative identities, and form connections that transcend traditional boundaries of interaction and reciprocity. This evolution underscores the central role of non-human agency in reshaping the digital landscapes of modern online games and in sustaining the distinctive mixture of gift, hybrid exchange and anti-gift that characterizes MMORPG communities.

8. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

8.1. Introduction and recall of research questions

This chapter delves into the intricate dynamics of online gifting networks in MMORPGs by drawing on gift and reciprocity theory and using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as an analytical framework for tracing relationships between actors and objects. Building upon the findings of the earlier chapters, it addresses how human and non-human actors collectively shape and are shaped by the practices of gift and anti-gift exchange. Central to this investigation is the question of how agency, reciprocity, and relationality evolve within the hybrid social and material networks of virtual worlds. These interactions reveal the interconnectedness of players, virtual objects, and the systems that govern these spaces, showcasing the complex interplay of cultural, economic, and social forces. By focusing on gifting practices in MMORPGs and situating them within wider developments in online gifting and digital cultures, the chapter aims to clarify how game-based environments become distinctive sites of digital gift exchange. By focusing on these interactions, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the socio-material complexities that define gifting economies in digital ecosystems, which remain both collaborative and contested terrains of interaction.

ANT, when placed alongside gift and reciprocity theory, offers a novel perspective for unpacking the intertwined roles of players, avatars, NPCs, virtual items, and broader environmental constructs in the gifting process. Figure 23 shows the actor relationship in the context of MMORPG from the ANT perspective. Unlike traditional theories that prioritize human-centric narratives, ANT decentralizes human agency, granting equal analytical importance to non-human entities such as virtual items, game mechanics, and the virtual world itself (Latour, 2005; Law, 2009). This approach is particularly effective in revealing how these actors, human and non-human, co-create meaning and influence the flow of objects and relationships within the network. Recent work has similarly used ANT to conceptualize immersive virtual and online environments as

networks of human and non-human actors (Schmidbauer et al., 2025; Resmadi et al., 2022). By treating these entities as active participants, ANT enables a granular exploration of power dynamics, agency, and the shifting roles of actors within gifting networks, providing a more nuanced understanding of virtual economies as socio-material phenomena (Callon, 1999). In this chapter, ANT is used as a configurational tool to trace how actors and objects are enrolled, translated, and stabilized within MMORPG gifting and anti-gifting networks, supporting the gift-theoretical analysis developed in earlier chapters.

The chapter begins by examining the individual components of the actor-network, including human actors (avatars and consumers), non-human actors (NPCs and the virtual environment), and the virtual items exchanged as gifts. These components are analyzed in terms of their agency and their ability to mediate, disrupt, or facilitate interactions within the network (Pearce, 2009). It then explores the dynamics of actor relationships, highlighting the processes of translation, generalized reciprocity, hybrid reciprocity, objective reciprocity, and malicious reciprocity that underpin social interactions in virtual gifting networks. Translation, as emphasized by ANT, refers to the negotiation and redefinition of roles and relationships between actors, offering a lens to understand how gifting evolves under the influence of market forces, game design, and cultural practices (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005). Taken together, these reciprocity configurations provide a structured way to analyse how gifts, counter-gifts, and hostile exchanges circulate across both human-to-human and human-to-non-human relationships in MMORPGs. By examining these relational dynamics, the chapter sheds light on the dualities of cooperation and competition, altruism and self-interest, which characterize virtual gifting.

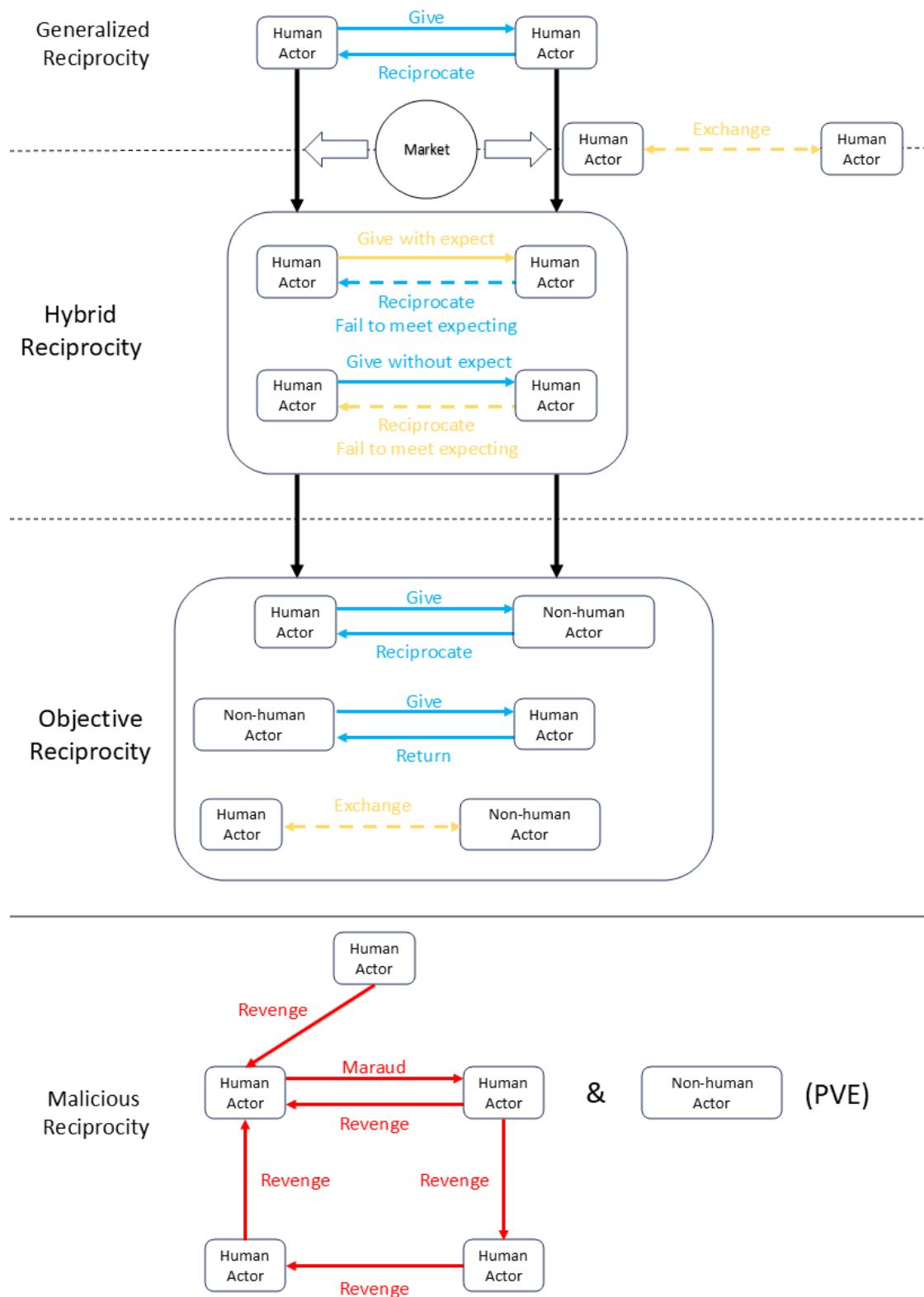


Figure 23 Actor Network of online gift in MMORPG

Source: Researcher's own generation based on the actor-network analysis developed in this thesis.

Finally, the discussion expands to consider the cultural and social outcomes of these networks, emphasizing the interplay between collaboration, conflict, and solidarity.

Virtual gifting networks are not isolated phenomena; they are deeply embedded within the cultural narratives and social rituals of gaming communities (Taylor, 2006). This section explores how gifting behaviors reinforce or challenge community norms, foster a sense of belonging, and contribute to the broader cultural fabric of virtual worlds. Additionally, it examines how economic pressures, such as the commercialization of virtual goods and the rise of real-money trading (RMT), shape the evolution of these networks, often creating tensions between traditional gifting practices and emerging hybrid economies (Lehdonvirta, 2010). By linking these processes to wider debates on digital cultures, virtual economies, and online sociality, the chapter positions virtual gifting in MMORPGs as a microcosm of larger societal dynamics in digital contexts.

To address the broader scope of this chapter, the following research questions are revisited:

- 1. How have online gifting practices in MMORPGs evolved, and what factors within these games and their surrounding cultures have shaped their development?**
- 2. What are the characteristics of the components of virtual gifting in MMORPGs, and how do these components shape the uniqueness of virtual gifts in this context?**
- 3. What are the unique forms of online gifting that arise in MMORPGs, and how do they influence social and cultural dynamics within game communities and related social networks?**

By integrating these elements, this chapter not only deepens our theoretical understanding of virtual gifting economies but also provides practical insights into designing more inclusive and engaging digital environments. It organises the analysis around four interlocking reciprocity configurations in MMORPG gifting networks, namely generalized, hybrid, objective, and malicious reciprocity, and shows how these configurations can be traced across human-to-human, human-to-computer-generated entity, and human-to-world relationships. Building on this framework, the chapter develops an account of how human and non-human actors participate together in

objective reciprocity, and proposes that anti-gift can be understood as a micro-level manifestation of malicious reciprocity that can, in specific contexts, contribute to group cohesion. The analysis seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering actionable recommendations for game developers and researchers. Through its ANT-guided exploration, the chapter illuminates the broader implications of gifting practices for digital anthropology, gaming studies, and virtual community building, emphasizing the importance of balancing relational and economic dimensions in fostering sustainable virtual ecosystems within MMORPGs. These dynamics resonate with recent MMO studies that link reciprocity, social interaction, and social capital to well-being and continued play (Kim, 2025; Choi & Williams, 2025).

8.2. Components of online gift exchange

8.2.1. Virtual items as gifts

In virtual worlds, gifting is characterized by the dynamic flow of virtual objects, which reflects the direction of social network construction and relational development. Virtual items, despite their intangible nature, function effectively as gifts to convey social and relational value. Their significance is embedded in the cultural context of specific virtual worlds, where they are perceived as valuable items earned through effort and skill. These items play dual roles in both collaborative gifting and competitive anti-gifting practices, underscoring their centrality in MMORPGs.

Virtual items in MMORPGs are dynamic objects that flow through networks of players, shaping social interactions and reciprocity, especially in early age of online games when such items were freely exchanged rather than BOE&BOP. In the context of traditional gifting, items move from one player to another with the intent of fostering goodwill, reinforcing alliances, or strengthening social bonds. For example, a rare weapon gifted during a faction raid could symbolize trust and mutual reliance among teammates. Conversely, in anti-gifting, the flow is characterized by antagonism, as items are forcibly taken or looted in Player vs. Player (PVP) settings, often imposing loss and obligation on the victim.

The defining characteristic of virtual gifts is their lack of physicality. Unlike traditional gifts that derive value from their material presence, virtual gifts exist as digital objects, such as in-game items and virtual currencies. This intangibility has historically been viewed as a limitation, with earlier literature questioning whether intangible goods could satisfy consumer needs or function as effective social tools (Belk, 2013; Godelier, 1999). More recent work on virtual currencies in online games similarly shows that players treat intangible in-game assets as meaningful economic and social resources (Gawron & Strzelecki, 2021). However, the context of online gaming environments reveals a different narrative, where the circulation of virtual items among players demonstrates their powerful social significance. As noted in section 5.2.2, virtual gifts in early MMORPGs are potent social tools that transcend their functional in-game utility. Regardless of the rarity or customizability of these items, players' social behaviours assign value to them based on their relational significance within the social framework of the game.

Unlike physical items, virtual gifts are closely tied to specific game events, mechanics, or platform updates. This linkage reflects the unique dynamics of digital environments, where the meaning and value of gifts are often fleeting but remain significant in fostering social connections and community engagement. The importance of virtual gifts often stems from their association with specific times and contexts. For instance, an in-game item gifted during a collaborative event holds immense value in that moment but may lose its relevance as game mechanics evolve or new items emerge. Despite this impermanence, the act of gifting itself carries enduring relational significance. The intention behind the gift, the interaction it facilitates, and the context in which it occurs form the core of its social meaning. The transient nature of the object does not diminish its ability to create meaningful connections between participants.

In virtual environments, gifting is often a performative behaviour that symbolizes relational investment, solidarity, or gratitude. The visibility of generosity in digital spaces is amplified, as acts of gifting are often publicly displayed, fostering a culture

of mutual appreciation and recognition. Section 6.2 elaborates on the emotional resonance associated with virtual gifts, despite their intangible nature. Players frequently recall significant gifting moments, such as receiving a crucial item during a challenging mission or giving a symbolic token to commemorate a shared achievement. These memories become part of the relational narrative, contributing to the long-term emotional and social fabric of the gaming community. The intangibility of the gift does not diminish its role in creating lasting impressions and strengthening social connections.

Virtual gifts also reflect and shape the cultural norms of the communities in which they are exchanged. As highlighted in Chapter 6 Part I, the value and significance of virtual gifts are deeply intertwined with the cultural narratives and practices of the virtual world. For instance, in games that emphasize collaboration and community-building, such as *Final Fantasy XIV*, gifting behaviors often align with cultural values of generosity, mutual support, and collective achievement. This cultural embeddedness is further illustrated by the integration of real-world traditions into virtual gifting practices. Many games host seasonal events or festivals that mirror cultural rituals, such as holiday gift exchanges or ceremonial offerings. These events provide players with opportunities to participate in shared cultural experiences, reinforcing their sense of belonging and identity within the community. The symbolic value of gifts exchanged during these events often transcends their functional utility, reflecting broader cultural themes of gratitude, celebration, and solidarity.

While virtual items are intangible, existing only within the digital realm, they are imbued with profound symbolic and emotional value. This intangibility does not detract from their function as gifts; instead, it amplifies their role as markers of effort, achievement, and identity. The significance of these items can be understood through the time, skill, and commitment that players invest in obtaining them and through the ways in which they extend the player's sense of self into the virtual world. A rare mount or limited-edition costume, for example, is not merely an object that enhances gameplay;

it operates as a visible sign of prestige, perseverance, or group belonging. In the context of gifting, this symbolic weight transforms virtual items into gestures of recognition and connection. When a player gifts an item to another, they transfer not only a useful resource but also a portion of their own history of effort and status in the game. This relational dimension aligns with anthropological theories of gifting, where the exchange of objects reinforces ongoing ties, obligations, and forms of social cohesion.

Besides, in anti-gift scenarios, the symbolic and relational significance of virtual items is equally pronounced. These items become highly sought-after objects in competitive interactions, where players vie to claim them through looting or other exploitative behaviors. Anti-gifting transforms the flow of objects into acts of symbolic violence, as described by Bourdieu's (1990) analysis of domination and power. A player who loots a rare item from a defeated opponent asserts their superiority, disrupting the traditional reciprocity of gifting but simultaneously reinforcing competitive social hierarchies. The cultural context of the virtual world further shapes these practices. In MMORPGs with PVP mechanics, for instance, anti-gifting is often normalized as part of the game's narrative and community ethos. Players participate in these practices not only for material gain but also to establish their status and influence within the virtual hierarchy. This dual function of virtual items, as objects of cooperation in gifting and conflict in anti-gifting, highlights their versatility and centrality in shaping the dynamics of virtual social networks.

8.2.2. Human actors: Avatar and Consumer

Human actors, represented by avatars and their associated consumers, are fundamental to the actor-network of gift exchange in MMORPGs. They act as both the embodiment of player identity and the agents mediating the flow of virtual objects, actively shaping the dynamics of gifting and anti-gifting practices. Avatars, as extensions of the consumer's self, exercise autonomy and agency within the virtual world, facilitating social relationships and constructing the cultural significance of virtual objects within gifting and anti-gifting networks.

Avatars serve as digital extensions of the consumer, embodying their identity and agency within the virtual environment. This connection reflects the concept of the “extended self” (Belk, 2014), where avatars act as proxies for human actors, enabling them to navigate and interact with complex virtual social networks. Recent research on avatar customization in metaverse environments similarly shows that players treat avatars as investable extensions of the self, attaching both monetary and emotional value to virtual appearance and identity (Lim et al., 2024). Through customization, behavior, and interaction, avatars project the persona of their consumer, bridging the gap between the player’s real-world identity and their role in the virtual world. The visual and behavioral choices made for avatars, such as attire, equipped items, or personalized appearance, signal the consumer’s status, aspirations, and intentions within the game’s social and cultural contexts. In the context of online gift exchange, avatars play a performative role by enacting the consumer’s intent to establish or strengthen social bonds. The exchanges between consumers in raid activities, mediated through avatars, foster trust and reinforce collective goals within player groups. This performativity is central to the relational dynamics of gifting in MMORPGs, where avatars translate consumer intentions into visible social behaviours.

The relationship between avatars and their consumers is foundational to their role in online gifting. Avatars are not independent entities; they are shaped by the consumer’s decisions, preferences, and identity. At the same time, avatars act back on the consumer by mediating interactions and influencing their social positioning within the virtual world. This reciprocal relationship aligns with Actor-Network Theory’s concept of translation, where the consumer’s agency is enacted through the avatar, and the avatar’s behavior feeds back into the consumer’s experiences and identity. Section 7.3.1 emphasizes that avatars allow consumers to navigate the complex dynamics of gifting and anti-gifting. Consumers use avatars to manage their social roles within the game’s ecosystem and to negotiate expectations of reciprocity and obligation. For example, the gifting of exclusive event items, as highlighted in mentoring systems, reflects not only

the consumer's investment in their mentees but also reinforces their identity as a knowledgeable and generous player within the guild or community. Conversely, in anti-gifting scenarios, avatars enable consumers to assert dominance or disrupt rival players, translating competitive strategies into visible actions within the actor-network.

Avatars embody the consumer's agency, acting as primary instruments for navigating the social and cultural complexities of MMORPGs. Unlike non-human actors, avatars are not constrained by predefined algorithms. Instead, they reflect human decision-making, adapting to the fluid dynamics of reciprocity and evolving social norms. This autonomy allows avatars to participate actively in both gifting and anti-gifting practices, shaping the relational and cultural significance of virtual objects and positioning human actors at the centre of MMORPG gift and anti-gift configurations.

8.2.3. Non-human actors: NPC and “the World”

Non-human actors, including NPCs (non-player characters) and the overarching construct of “the world,” are critical components of the actor-network in MMORPGs. These actors, though not controlled by players, exhibit forms of agency, autonomy, and authority that significantly influence the dynamics of online gift exchange. By shaping narratives, regulating the flow of virtual objects, and constructing the virtual environment, non-human actors mediate interactions and contribute directly to the relational and cultural frameworks of gifting practices. From an ANT perspective, they are not merely technical background elements but participate as actants that translate, stabilize, and sometimes disrupt gifting relationships between human players.

NPC

NPCs serve as mediators between players and the virtual environment, playing diverse roles such as quest-givers, merchants, and narrative guides. Despite being computer generated entities, NPCs exhibit a form of agency through their designed behaviors, influencing player interactions, facilitating the flow of virtual items, and enforcing the norms of the game world. This design grants them autonomy within the constraints, positioning them as significant actors in the gifting network. In section 6.2,

NPCs are shown to structure gifting through formalized interactions. For example, mentoring systems often rely on NPCs to define the parameters of relationships, providing frameworks for apprentices to receive items or buffs from their mentors. By acting as intermediaries, NPCs ensure that gifting practices align with broader narrative and gameplay goals, reinforcing their authority within the actor-network. This designed autonomy is essential for maintaining the coherence of the virtual world and shaping player interactions. Recent work on social NPC modelling similarly treats non-player characters as deliberately designed social agents with internal states, communication patterns, and information flows, rather than as simple scripted functions (Azad & Martens, 2021; Aydin et al., 2023).

NPCs also act as storytellers, embedding players within the cultural and social fabric of the game. Through quests and dialogue, NPCs contextualize gifting behaviors, linking them to broader narratives. As noted in Chapter 5, seasonal events and faction-specific ceremonies often involve NPCs encouraging players to participate in gift exchanges. These actions enhance immersion and reinforce social norms underpinning gifting practices. Additionally, in anti-gifting scenarios, NPC enemies act as adversarial agents, introducing conflict into the actor-network by controlling valuable resources and challenging players to engage in cooperative or competitive exchanges. Empirical studies of interaction with agents and avatars in virtual environments show that such figures can evoke social presence and engagement that are experienced as genuinely interpersonal, even when the agents are known to be non-human (Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Hu et al., 2025).

NPCs play an instrumental role in the facilitation of gift exchange within MMORPGs. In the context of MMORPGs, NPCs are traditionally viewed as non-human actors programmed to serve specific functions such as quest-giving, trading, or storytelling. However, under certain conditions, players begin to perceive NPCs as “friends” or emotionally significant entities, attributing to them characteristics of human-like agency and relational capacity. This phenomenon transforms the role of NPCs within

the actor-network, allowing them to participate in gift exchange in ways that resemble human actors. When players engage with NPCs on an emotional or relational level, the dynamic of gift exchange shifts. NPCs, often designed with detailed personalities, backstories, and dialogue, create an illusion of interpersonal connection. In these scenarios, gifting becomes more than a transactional act; it is redefined as a meaningful gesture of friendship or support. Players might provide resources, items, or in-game currency to NPCs, not out of gameplay necessity, but as an expression of care or allegiance. This form of interaction repositions NPCs within the actor-network as relational agents. Their capacity to elicit emotional responses from players enables them to foster connections that parallel human-to-human relationships. Findings in Chapter 7 illustrate this process, for instance when participants describe grief, loyalty, or gratitude towards long-term companion NPCs, echoing broader evidence that users can develop attachment and care towards companion-like digital entities (Hu et al., 2025). The network expands to include NPCs as integral participants in social exchanges, blurring the boundaries between programmed entities and human actors.

Besides, the role of NPCs in constructing narratives and guiding interactions is not limited to gifting alone. NPC merchants, for instance, regulate the availability of certain items, influencing the choices players make in their gifting strategies. Their presence ensures a structured economy within the virtual world, where players must interact with NPCs to acquire or exchange items. This regulatory function reinforces their position as mediators of the virtual economy, linking their agency to both gifting and broader economic dynamics. Besides, NPCs' influence also extends to anti-gifting practices. As enemies or competitors, NPCs often become the targets of looting or sabotage, creating opportunities for players to engage in antagonistic behaviors. These interactions highlight the dual role of NPCs as both facilitators and adversaries within the actor-network, showcasing their capacity to shape the relational and competitive aspects of virtual worlds.

The perception of NPCs as “friends” introduces a new layer of complexity to the

actor-network. Traditional gift exchange between human actors—such as players and their avatars—is now interwoven with non-human actors that are treated as relational equals. This creates a multi-dimensional network where gifts circulate not only among players but also between players and NPCs. Findings in section 7.5 highlight cases where players regularly interact with NPCs through repetitive gifting mechanics, such as providing food to a favorite character or delivering rare items to complete their narrative arcs. These actions are not merely gameplay tasks but are often imbued with emotional significance. By participating in these exchanges, NPCs actively shape the social fabric of the virtual world, demonstrating how their presence fosters complex relationships that extend beyond their programmed roles. These patterned exchanges form an important empirical basis for the notion of objective reciprocity developed later in this chapter, where human–non-human gifting follows clear and predictable rules yet is experienced as meaningful by players.

Although NPCs are inherently non-human actors, their design allows them to exhibit a form of symbolic agency within the network. Players attribute intentions and emotions to NPCs based on their interactions, perceiving them as autonomous participants in the social structure of the game. This perceived agency reinforces the relational ties between players and NPCs, transforming routine exchanges into meaningful gestures of trust, respect, or companionship. For example, NPCs that reward players with heartfelt dialogue or unique items in response to gifts create a feedback loop that strengthens the bond between the player and the NPC. This mutual reinforcement positions NPCs as active participants in the gift economy, shaping the relational dynamics of the actor-network and enhancing the immersion of the virtual world. In some systems, NPCs even share information about players among themselves to update beliefs and reputations, demonstrating how non-human actors can participate in the circulation of evaluation and “return” within the network (Aydin et al., 2023; Azad & Martens, 2021).

The World

Beyond individual NPCs, the virtual world itself functions as a non-human actor. “The world” encompasses the rules, mechanics, and environmental features that shape player behavior and interactions. Unlike NPCs, whose roles are often discrete, the world operates as a cohesive system, influencing the conditions of gifting and anti-gifting on a broader scale. It acts as an omnipresent actor, embedding players within a structured and immersive environment where their actions are guided and constrained by the world’s design.

Section 7.2 emphasizes how world agency regulates the flow of virtual objects. For example, limited-time events or region-specific resources create scarcity, incentivizing gifting or competitive exchanges. These mechanics exemplify the world’s authority in dictating the terms of interaction, positioning it as a powerful actor within the actor-network. Scarcity, in particular, drives social behaviors by creating demand for specific items, which often become the focal points of gifting practices. Players respond to these constraints by either collaborating or competing, further embedding the virtual world’s influence within the social dynamics of the game. From a design and AI perspective, this world-level agency is realized through rule systems, scripted events, and algorithmic controllers that coordinate how NPCs, items, and spaces behave together. This echoes recent work on social agents and virtual environments that treats algorithms and environments as active shapers of interaction rather than neutral backdrops (Azad et al., 2025; Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022).

The virtual world also constructs the cultural and relational context for gifting. Shared spaces, aesthetic design, and dynamic events provide the backdrop for meaningful exchanges. By embedding players in richly detailed environments, the world fosters a sense of community and belonging, aligning gifting practices with the social norms and cultural narratives of the game. World agency thus extends beyond facilitating interactions to actively shaping the relational dynamics of the actor-network.

8.3. Actor Relationships in Virtual Worlds

The dynamics of online gifting networks in MMORPGs are fundamentally shaped by

the diverse forms of reciprocity that underpin player interactions. Reciprocity serves as the foundation of actor relationships, reflecting how gifts, resources, and rewards circulate within and between individuals and groups. By examining these interactions, we can understand how gifting networks create, sustain, and transform social and economic structures within virtual worlds. This section explores three key dimensions of reciprocity within MMORPGs: generalized and hybrid reciprocity in human-to-human interactions, malicious reciprocity in competitive contexts, and objective reciprocity in human-to-non-human dynamics. These dimensions not only reveal the complexity of virtual gifting networks but also illustrate how reciprocity mediates both cooperation and competition, fostering unique social relationships and cultural practices. In persistent MMORPG worlds, players repeatedly encounter the same partners and opponents, remember past interactions and move between cooperative and antagonistic roles over long periods of time, which allows reciprocity patterns to evolve in ways that are difficult to capture in short-session environments such as live-streaming and social media gifting. Existing work on digital gifts has mainly focused on one-directional transfers from viewers to creators or from users to influencers (Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Liu et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024; Aljarah et al., 2025), while the present chapter extends these discussions to multi-directional, world-based relationships where reciprocity connects groups, factions and mixed human–non-human networks.

8.3.1. Human to human: From Generalized Reciprocity to Hybrid Reciprocity

Under the dual influences of the native gift economy within virtual worlds and the external market economy of the real world, the practice of gift exchange in virtual environments has undergone a significant shift from generalized reciprocity to hybrid reciprocity. This transformation is closely tied to the growing impact of real-world market forces on digital ecosystems. Early online games were characterized by generalized reciprocity, where players engaged in acts of giving without explicit expectations of return, fostering a sense of community and mutual support. However, the integration of commercial mechanisms into gaming platforms has altered the

dynamics of reciprocity, resulting in the emergence of hybrid reciprocity, which combines elements of relational generosity with market-oriented exchange. The interview material and historical accounts discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 make it possible to track this change as a gradual reconfiguration of everyday habits, complaints and justifications, rather than as a sudden replacement of one model by another.

In the initial stages of online gaming, generalized reciprocity played a central role in shaping social interactions. Acts of gifting were predominantly altruistic, driven by a shared mission and the desire to build communal relationships. For instance, in early MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), players frequently offered resources, equipment, or assistance to teammates or new players as gestures of goodwill. This behavior aligned with anthropological concepts of generalized reciprocity, wherein gift exchange strengthens social bonds and maintains group cohesion (Mauss, 1925; Sahlins, 1972). Chapter 5 emphasizes how generalized reciprocity created environments of trust and collaboration in early online games. Players engaged in gifting to forge alliances, support cooperative missions, and cultivate a sense of belonging. These exchanges were often informal and voluntary, reflecting the communal ethos of early gaming communities. For example, players would spontaneously share critical in-game items during challenging missions to ensure team success, reinforcing a shared identity and collective purpose.

In this phase, generalized reciprocity mirrors traditional gift exchange dynamics. Human actors, represented as players within the game, initiate gift-giving through their avatars. These gifting actions are characterized by altruism—players do not expect explicit or immediate returns, yet their gestures often lead to indirect or future reciprocation, fostering a self-reinforcing cycle of goodwill. Notably, virtual items emerge as legitimate and meaningful gifts within this network. They transcend their digital nature by becoming symbols of trust, collaboration, and social value. The act of giving a virtual item, whether it be rare equipment or essential resources, gains significance not only for its functional utility but also for the relational bonds it

establishes. In these exchanges, virtual items serve as tools to build community cohesion and solidarity, aligning with Mauss's (1925) concept of the gift as a social glue that binds individuals within a network of mutual obligations and trust. Generalized reciprocity ensured that these interactions remained informal and voluntary, reinforcing the communal ethos of early MMORPG communities. Through such gifting practices, players collectively upheld a culture of inclusivity and mutual aid, ensuring the network's stability and fostering a shared sense of belonging. At the same time, some players were already engaging in "semi-sale, semi-gift" exchanges, where small payments, side-deals or negotiated returns appeared around otherwise generous acts, foreshadowing the mixed motives that later become central in hybrid reciprocity.

The shift from generalized to hybrid reciprocity was significantly influenced by the integration of real-world market mechanisms into virtual environments. The commercialization of online games introduced new factors that reshaped the practice of gift exchange. Systems such as pay-to-play models, microtransactions, and real-money trading (RMT) blurred the boundaries between gifts as relational acts and as economic transactions. These changes disrupted the purely altruistic nature of early gifting practices. As discussed in Chapter 6.4, the commercialization of virtual items created a market-driven context in which gifts were increasingly evaluated based on their economic value rather than their relational meaning. Players began to approach gifting with a more calculated mindset, carefully weighing the costs and benefits of their actions. For instance, gifting rare or expensive items could be motivated not only by goodwill but also by a desire to gain social capital, elevate one's status, or secure reciprocal benefits within the game's social network. This blending of motives exemplifies hybrid reciprocity, where gifting simultaneously serves relational and transactional purposes. Recent work on digital gifting in live-streaming and social media environments points to similar mixtures of altruism, visibility-seeking and platform incentives (Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2024;

Aljarah et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). However, these studies mostly examine one-directional transfers between audiences and content creators, whereas the empirical material in this thesis shows how hybrid reciprocity develops inside long-term peer networks, guild economies and faction politics in MMORPGs.

The rise of market-oriented gifting behaviors also led to the commodification of social relationships within virtual environments. What were once symbolic acts of trust and solidarity have become transactional tools for achieving individual or collective goals. This commodification reflects broader trends in digital economies, where social interactions are often mediated by economic considerations and platform-driven incentives. For example, many games now reward gifting behaviors with achievements, badges, or in-game advantages. While these rewards encourage participation, they also introduce an extrinsic motivation that complicates the relational authenticity of gifting. Players may gift not out of genuine altruism but to meet platform objectives or optimize their in-game performance. This shift highlights the growing influence of economic systems in shaping the dynamics of reciprocity in virtual spaces. Interviewees describe situations where gifting is explicitly calculated in terms of monetary value or progression benefits, and where disappointment or resentment arises when a return gift is judged as “not matching” the original expense. These narratives echo the “dark side” findings in digital gifting research, which highlight how gamified reward structures and conversion rates can erode trust and produce anxiety, envy or perceived exploitation among participants (Wohn & Freeman, 2020; Baldacchino, 2022; Guo et al., 2024; Ma, 2023).

Hybrid reciprocity represents a blending of altruistic intentions with market-driven motives, resulting in a nuanced and dynamic approach to virtual gifting practices. Players engage in gifting behaviors that serve both relational and instrumental purposes. However, this dual-purpose approach introduces complexities that blur the lines between genuine altruism and calculated exchange, influenced by social values and external market forces.

In hybrid reciprocity, gifting operates through two primary modes, reflecting distinct behaviors within actor relationships. First, giving with expectations involves players offering gifts with the assumption of future reciprocation. This mode creates conditional relationships where the giver carefully monitors whether the recipient fulfills the implied terms of the exchange. Such exchanges highlight the influence of market-driven logic, as players calculate the potential benefits of their generosity, shifting the focus from pure altruism to transactional interaction. This behavior corresponds to the orange-colored pathways in Figure 23, where gifting is motivated by transactional or status-driven intentions.

Second, giving without explicit expectations embodies a more generous approach, often rooted in goodwill and community building. In this mode, players gift items or assistance without anticipating immediate returns, fostering trust and a sense of belonging. For example, a player might freely share a critical item during a challenging raid, reinforcing mutual support within the team. These actions align with the blue-colored pathways, where gifting reflects a relational generosity that prioritizes the collective over the individual. However, even in these seemingly altruistic exchanges, the recipient may feel an implicit obligation to reciprocate over time, revealing the subtle interplay between generosity and unspoken social norms. The same player may therefore move between conditional and open-handed gifting in different situations, which means that generalized reciprocity and hybrid reciprocity coexist within the same network instead of forming two neatly separated regimes.

Reciprocity plays a critical role in shaping relationships. When recipients meet or exceed expectations, trust and collaboration are reinforced, creating a virtuous cycle of mutual benefit. Conversely, unmet expectations can lead to dissatisfaction or strained relationships. These tensions underscore the delicate balance between generosity and obligation in hybrid reciprocity, as well as the potential for conflict when this balance is disrupted. The dual pathways of hybrid reciprocity—altruistic and market-driven—frequently coexist and intersect, forming complex relational dynamics. As shown in

Figure 23, actor relationships within hybrid reciprocity often involve the crossing of these dual-colored behavioral pathways. This interaction highlights the adaptability of hybrid reciprocity, as players navigate between these behaviors to align with their goals and social contexts. Players who view gifting as a balanced exchange may prioritize transactions that maximize their own benefits, potentially undermining relational trust. Similarly, recipients may feel pressured to reciprocate, even when they lack the resources or willingness to do so, leading to dissatisfaction or relational strain. These dynamics can provoke skepticism about the sincerity of gifting and its social meaning, as players question whether acts of generosity are genuine or calculated. This tension ultimately reflects the intricate interplay between altruism and market-driven motivations in hybrid reciprocity. The wider digital gifting literature shows that similar tensions arise in live-streaming and social media contexts (Freling et al., 2024; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Kim et al., 2025), yet the MMORPG data emphasize that such tensions are negotiated within relatively stable groups that can discuss, sanction or reinterpret gifting norms over time, instead of being confined to one-off encounters.

The shift to hybrid reciprocity also raises questions about the long-term sustainability of gifting practices in virtual environments. As gifting becomes more entwined with market logic, the balance between altruism and transactional exchange may tilt toward the latter, eroding the communal ethos that characterized early online gaming. Maintaining this balance is essential to preserving the relational and cultural significance of gifting in virtual spaces. In this context, some players choose to adhere to a purely generalized reciprocity environment, maintaining an altruistic and community-focused approach to gifting within virtual worlds. These players aim to preserve the traditional ethos of selfless giving, emphasizing collaboration, mutual support, and the absence of explicit expectations for return. For players who maintain a commitment to generalized reciprocity, the act of gifting remains an expression of goodwill and collective responsibility. This choice often reflects a resistance to the commercialization of gifting practices and a desire to uphold the communal values that

characterized the early days of online gaming. These players are motivated by a sense of solidarity and mutual aid, viewing gift exchange as a way to strengthen social bonds and reinforce the inclusivity of the community.

Section 5.3.2 highlights examples of this behavior, particularly in communities that consciously distance themselves from market-oriented systems. For instance, players in certain guilds or MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) actively discourage or prohibit real-money trading (RMT) or in-game purchases, emphasizing organic interactions and genuine relational exchanges. By creating gifting systems rooted in generalized reciprocity, these communities foster environments of trust and cooperation, shielding themselves from the transactional pressures of hybrid reciprocity. The decision to adhere to generalized reciprocity often involves a deliberate effort to resist external influences, such as platform incentives or monetization schemes. Players may form alliances or smaller, tight-knit groups that prioritize shared experiences over competitive or economic goals. These efforts not only preserve the spirit of altruistic gifting but also contribute to the creation of subcultures within larger virtual worlds, where trust and authenticity are highly valued. These resistant practices resonate with broader discussions of non-market spaces in digital economies and provide concrete examples of how players carve out zones of generalized reciprocity inside heavily monetized infrastructures (Skågeby, 2010; Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024).

However, when the internal environment of specific MMORPGs becomes inevitably dominated by market forces, players are compelled to make trade-offs within the framework of hybrid reciprocity. Some players actively adapt to hybrid reciprocity, leveraging its transactional dynamics to maximize their own benefits while maintaining sufficient relational exchanges to sustain their networks. For these players, the strategic blending of altruistic gestures and calculated exchanges allows them to navigate the pressures of monetization and competitive play effectively. For instance, gifting valuable items in exchange for long-term cooperation or alliances reflects a pragmatic

approach to hybrid reciprocity, where the balance between giving and expectation is carefully managed to align with personal or collective goals.

In contrast, other players choose to escape hybrid reciprocity altogether, distancing themselves from the complex interplay of altruism and economic rationality. This decision often arises from dissatisfaction with the pressures and expectations associated with hybrid reciprocity, such as the implicit obligations to reciprocate or the perceived commodification of social relationships. Players who escape hybrid reciprocity may opt for more solitary or individualized gaming experiences, where gifting and reciprocity are not central to their interactions. For example, section 6.4 discusses how some players prefer single-player modes or avoid community-driven systems, focusing instead on self-sufficiency and personal goals. These players deliberately minimize their involvement in gifting practices to avoid the transactional dynamics that hybrid reciprocity often entails. The escape from hybrid reciprocity can also manifest in alternative forms of interaction, such as engaging with non-human entities or participating in game mechanics that do not involve direct player-to-player exchanges. By shifting their focus away from social gifting, these players carve out spaces for themselves within virtual worlds that align more closely with their individual preferences and values. Taken together, adaptation to hybrid reciprocity, the defence of generalized reciprocity and withdrawal from gifting altogether show that players are not simply shaped by monetization systems. They actively negotiate how far economic calculation should enter their relationships, which prepares the ground for the more antagonistic forms of reciprocity discussed later in this chapter.

8.3.2. Human to non-human: Objective Reciprocity

The decision to escape hybrid reciprocity reflects a broader range of player strategies within MMORPGs, showcasing the diverse ways individuals navigate the complex social and economic dynamics of virtual worlds. For those who step away from the obligations and transactional nature of hybrid reciprocity, interactions with non-human actors often become a meaningful alternative. Non-human actors, such as NPCs and

virtual items, provide structured and reliable pathways for engagement, free from the ambiguities and pressures that characterize human-to-human exchanges. These interactions, governed by clear rules and automated behaviors, form the foundation of objective reciprocity, offering a contrasting yet complementary dynamic to the complexities of hybrid reciprocity. In MMORPGs, the relationship between humans and non-human actors (such as NPCs and virtual items) embodies objective reciprocity, a unique interactive mode that emphasizes clarity, balance, and fairness. By engaging with non-human actors, players can maintain purposeful and fulfilling interactions without the emotional or social strains associated with hybrid reciprocity. This interaction mode not only reflects the structural integrity and intentionality of non-human actors but also highlights their social and cultural significance within the virtual community. Recent studies on social companion AI and virtual agents similarly show that users often seek out low-pressure, rule-based interaction with non-human entities when human relationships feel demanding or unpredictable, which helps to explain why these objective and clearly scripted exchanges are perceived as attractive alternatives in MMORPG contexts (Hu et al., 2025; Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022).

The uniqueness of human-to-non-human relationships lies in their dual influence: they are driven by player behavior and shaped by the object capacity, automation, and agency of digital entities. Unlike human-to-human interactions, which are often characterized by ambiguity and misunderstandings, non-human actors exhibit highly structured, automated, and consistent interactions. Automation enables digital entities to actively respond to players' actions and, in some cases, initiate interactions with human actors. Through this autonomy, digital entities transcend their role as purely functional tools, becoming key participants in the virtual behavior network. Meanwhile, their consistency eliminates uncertainties in player interactions, offering a reliable behavior model with clear expectations. This relationship surpasses traditional notions of tool-based interaction as digital entities are imbued with social and emotional value, making them indispensable components of the player behavior network in MMORPGs.

Work on smart objects, object-oriented ontology and ANT-inspired analyses of digital agents argues that such entities exercise practical agency through capacities for action, autonomy and authority, which supports an interpretation of these exchanges as reciprocal relations and not merely one-way tool use (Hoffman & Novak, 2018; Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Aydin et al., 2023).

As illustrated in Figure 23, objective reciprocity is typically manifested through reciprocal interactions between players and non-human actors. The structured and automated characteristics of these exchanges ensure clarity and balance, providing a dependable framework for relationships between players and non-human actors. Objective reciprocity primarily operates through three pathways. The first involves players offering resources or performing actions for non-human actors, who then reciprocate with rewards. For example, a player might deliver an item to an NPC, who then grants them resources or unlocks a new quest. This pathway highlights the intentionality and purposefulness of the interaction. The second pathway is initiated by non-human actors who provide gifts, rewards, or tasks to players, prompting reciprocal actions. For instance, an NPC might gift a player an item to strengthen the relationship between the player's avatar and the NPC, showcasing the non-human actor's ability to establish and define the terms of interaction. The third pathway involves strictly balanced functional exchanges, such as a player purchasing an item from an NPC merchant. These interactions adhere to predefined rules of equivalence, focusing on fairness and transparency, without emotional or narrative components, and are crucial for maintaining the stability of the in-game economy. Game AI and NPC-modelling research reinforces this description by showing how belief-formation and reputation systems among NPCs can monitor player actions and adjust access, rewards and prices accordingly, turning objective reciprocity into a rule-based but responsive institutional layer inside the game world (Azad & Martens, 2021; Aydin et al., 2023).

NPCs, as autonomous actors, play a central role in these pathways, establishing deep connections with players through both functional and emotional interactions.

Functional NPCs, such as merchants or quest-givers, interact with players through balanced exchanges governed by explicit rules. Their actions are controlled by the game's world agency, ensuring purposeful and consistent interactions. These transactional exchanges are transparent and predictable, reflecting inherent fairness and clarity while eliminating the uncertainty and imbalance often present in human-to-human interactions. Such balanced reciprocity not only stabilizes the in-game economy but also fosters trust between players and non-human participants. Interview accounts indicate that players often use these predictable exchanges as a reference point when evaluating more ambiguous human gifting and anti-gifting, describing NPC interactions as "safe" or "clean" in contrast to the social risks associated with other players.

In contrast, friendly NPCs engage players in gifting relationships, which are intentional and emotionally driven. Unlike human gifting, where conflicting intentions or misunderstandings can disrupt the balance of giving and reciprocating, NPC gifting is precise and designed to enhance the player's experience. For instance, a friendly NPC might reward a player with a rare item upon completing a significant questline or during a special in-game event. These gifts are purposeful, advancing the game's narrative, rewarding effort, or encouraging further engagement. In this role, NPCs mirror human actors in their capacity to provide social and emotional value. Section 7.4 highlights this equivalence, noting that NPCs can effectively offer emotional support, particularly for introverted players who may find interactions with NPCs less intimidating than those with human players. These relationships help players overcome social barriers and integrate into the broader virtual community. Empirical research on games and social companion AI similarly finds that attachment and empathy toward virtual characters can support socio-emotional functioning and provide a sense of companionship that players sometimes experience as more reliable than human contact (Shoshani et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2025).

The cultural significance of human-to-digital entity relationships lies in their ability

to create a novel experiential domain that transcends real-world social interactions. In this domain, relationships between human and non-human actors are viewed as equivalent. Whether it is a player interacting with an NPC or forming emotional connections through virtual items, these relationships reflect the equality of diverse actors within the behavior network. This equality is evident as all players experience the same narratives and build relationships with the same NPCs. These shared experiences deepen the connection between players and NPCs while fostering bonds among players through similar interaction patterns. For example, NPCs involved in main storylines often become key components of collective player memory. These memories resonate across the player base, transforming the gaming community into a shared cultural and emotional space. Studies of social presence in virtual environments note similar effects when multiple users repeatedly interact with the same agents or avatars and come to treat those digital figures as shared social reference points, which aligns with the way story-critical NPCs function as anchors for collective memory in MMORPGs (Kyrilitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Jacucci et al., 2024).

The social significance of these relationships also lies in their ability to guide player behavior through game rules, forming a dynamic reciprocity network. Within this network, digital entities enhance the stability of virtual gifting systems through intentionality and consistency, while mechanisms such as scarcity and time pressure drive player engagement. For instance, limited-time events or rare rewards encourage collaboration and competition among players, enriching the game's social ecosystem. Objective reciprocity in this sense operates at both the micro level of specific NPC–player exchanges and the macro level of world mechanics that script how labour, time and rewards circulate between human and non-human actants.

In conclusion, the relationship between humans and non-human actors in MMORPGs exemplifies the principles of objective reciprocity, where structured, automated, and purposeful interactions foster meaningful connections. NPCs and virtual items, as key representatives of digital entities, play vital roles in stabilizing

economic systems, offering emotional support, and creating shared experiences. These interactions transcend functional roles, establishing human-to-digital relationships as integral components of the actor-network. By balancing structure and emotional resonance, these relationships strengthen the cohesion of virtual communities and highlight the transformative potential of non-human actors in digital societies. These findings show that objective reciprocity does not eliminate emotion, attachment or tension but provides a distinct mode of exchange that sits alongside hybrid reciprocity and malicious reciprocity, setting the stage for the analysis of anti-gift practices in the following subsection.

8.3.3. Human to human: Anti-gift and Malicious Reciprocity

Anti-gift refers to deliberate and malicious behaviors within MMORPGs designed to disrupt reciprocity by targeting others through appropriation, such as looting, resource exploitation, or causing harm. Unlike traditional gifting, which seeks to nurture relationships, anti-gifting is marked by its exploitative intent, seizing resources or inflicting losses to secure personal gain. This emphasis on deliberate harm and appropriation positions anti-gift within the “dark side” of gifting and exchange, where the act of taking becomes central to how relationships are defined and remembered (Hyde, 1983; Sherry, 1983).

A key feature of anti-gift is its explicit focus on plundering. While conventional PVP interactions often aim to establish dominance through skill and combat, anti-gifting specifically targets the appropriation of resources. As discussed in section 5.4.1, virtual items hold significant value in players' eyes, making their loss during PVP actions particularly impactful. This loss frequently compels players to seek revenge, creating a cyclical model of behavior in which marauding generates loss and loss incites retaliation. Through this recurring sequence of marauding, loss, and revenge, anti-gift develops into a recognisable pattern of interaction rather than an isolated episode of aggression.

The structural design of MMORPGs provides fertile ground for anti-gift behaviors to thrive. Digital environments in these games often integrate mechanics such as open-

world PVP systems, resource scarcity, and competitive objectives, which encourage players to engage in opportunistic, exploitative actions. Features like factional conflicts or territory control further incentivize anti-gift behaviors by embedding them into the broader game economy. By creating systems that reward competitive advantage, games position anti-gift as an effective, if antagonistic, strategy for achieving in-game goals. Besides, MMORPGs also amplify these behaviors through their focus on asymmetrical power dynamics. Players with greater resources or skills are often able to dominate weaker opponents, reinforcing the exploitative nature of anti-gift. This dynamic reflects how game mechanics privilege the agency of aggressors, legitimizing adversarial actions and embedding them within the game's reward structures. By providing both the tools and the incentives for players to disrupt reciprocity, MMORPGs normalize anti-gift behaviors as part of their competitive framework. Studies of toxicity and griefing in online games reach similar conclusions, showing how ranked systems, reward structures and poorly moderated spaces support harassment, predatory play and targeted disruption (Kowert, 2020; Sun et al., 2024; Frommel et al., 2023; Kordyaka et al., 2023).

Anti-gift behaviors are further mediated by the anonymity and lawlessness afforded by virtual environments. Players are able to act without fear of real-world repercussions, which enables them to explore actions that might otherwise be constrained by social norms or ethical considerations. This detachment allows anti-gift behaviors to flourish, as players are less accountable for their actions, and the consequences remain confined to the virtual world. At the same time, players actively reinterpret these conditions through local cultures of play, sometimes presenting anti-gift actions as jokes, tests or legitimate responses to perceived disrespect, which echoes wider findings that toxic practices are frequently normalized as “part of the game” (Beres et al., 2021; Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023; Zsila et al., 2022). It is also resonated with the cultural backdrop of many MMORPGs, especially those influenced by traditions such as *jianghu* (martial arts world), infuses anti-gift with deeper meaning. These

environments often resonate with themes of honor, revenge, and swift retribution. Within this context, anti-gift behaviors are not simply gameplay strategies but extensions of broader cultural narratives. Acts of marauding or revenge align with the ethos of seeking justice.

Malicious reciprocity represents the underlying logic of anti-gift. Unlike generalized or hybrid reciprocity, which aim to foster relationships or balance exchanges, malicious reciprocity is defined by conflict-driven interactions that prioritize dominance, retaliation, and resource exploitation. Malicious reciprocity in MMORPGs represents a unique social dynamic where adversarial exchanges like marauding and revenge serve as the basis for constructing relationships between players. This framework reveals a paradoxical yet essential mechanism within virtual communities where harm and retaliation shape social connections and collective identities. Compared with classical formulations of negative reciprocity, which still assume some orientation to balanced exchange, malicious reciprocity emphasizes repeated cycles of injury and counter-injury in which actors primarily seek to damage, unsettle or intimidate one another over time.

In its essence, malicious reciprocity revolves around the actions of marauding and revenge, which act as catalysts for forming and sustaining relationships between players. Marauding, as an aggressive and predatory behavior, involves the seizure of resources, items, or virtual wealth from other players. Revenge, as the reactive counterpart to marauding, is an intentional response by the aggrieved party, seeking to reclaim losses or restore equilibrium. The interplay of these two actions creates a cyclical relationship where the roles of aggressor and victim are fluid, and players oscillate between the two depending on the evolving dynamics of their interactions. The cycle of malicious reciprocity often begins with a single act of marauding, which disrupts the status quo and provokes retaliation. The victim of the maraud, now driven by a sense of loss or injustice, may seek to enact revenge, either directly targeting the original aggressor or extending the cycle to other players within the network. This ongoing exchange of harm

and retaliation binds players in a web of adversarial connections, where the relationships are not defined by mutual benefit or goodwill but by competition and rivalry. Each act of marauding or revenge deepens these ties, creating a social structure built on conflict and opposition.

What distinguishes malicious reciprocity is its capacity to extend beyond simple one-on-one exchanges, evolving into a broader network of interconnected relationships. The introduction of counter-marauding as a reactive strategy adds complexity to this system. Counter-marauding involves players or groups intervening on behalf of victims, either to prevent future attacks or to retaliate against aggressors. These actions often result in the formation of alliances or coalitions, where collective efforts are directed at protecting shared interests or exacting group revenge. Thus, while malicious reciprocity originates as a dyadic relationship between an aggressor and a victim, it quickly expands to include multiple actors, forming branching networks of adversarial and defensive interactions. The social relationships forged through malicious reciprocity are deeply dynamic, constantly shifting based on the outcomes of marauding and revenge. These relationships evolve as players negotiate their roles within the network. A player who begins as a victim of marauding may rise to become an aggressor, exploiting new opportunities to assert dominance or settle old scores. Similarly, alliances formed through counter-marauding may dissolve or transform as the balance of power within the network changes. This fluidity ensures that the network of relationships remains active and engaging, driving ongoing participation and interaction within the virtual community. Recent work on dark participation and online conflict similarly shows how harassment, retaliation and informal “policing” roles crystallise into relatively stable positions within communities, rather than remaining as isolated incidents (Kowert et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2024; Zsila & Demetrovics, 2025).

Despite its adversarial nature, malicious reciprocity contributes to the cohesion of virtual communities in unexpected ways. The cycles of marauding and revenge create shared experiences that foster a sense of identity among players. Victims of marauding,

for instance, often find solidarity with others who have suffered similar losses, leading to the formation of support groups or guilds united by a common purpose. These groups, in turn, may adopt counter-marauding strategies, strengthen their internal bonds while reinforce their opposition to external threats. The conflict-driven nature of malicious reciprocity thus paradoxically promotes social integration, as players navigate the complexities of rivalry and alliance. Historical and contemporary research on PK systems supports this interpretation, demonstrating that mechanisms for punishment, bounty hunting and community defence can channel hostile encounters into ongoing participation and collective identity formation (Yoon & Cheon, 2014; Nexø et al., 2024). In this sense, anti-gift operates as a paradoxical engine of solidarity, generating dense networks of obligation, protection and shared memory precisely through cycles of harm and retribution.

8.4. Network Dynamics and Social Solidarity

In MMORPGs, the dynamics of social networks and solidarity reflect a distinctive interplay between collaboration, reciprocity, and cultural exchange. Virtual environments, unbounded by the constraints of physical space and traditional societal structures, provide fertile ground for the emergence of diverse social networks. Recent research has increasingly framed MMORPGs as social spaces where players build and maintain social capital, generate a sense of belonging, and derive subjective well-being from their embeddedness in gaming communities (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Kim, 2025; Pang et al., 2025; Sachan et al., 2025; Scheifer & Samuel, 2025; Wu & Chang, 2025; Choi & Williams, 2025). Central to these networks is the practice of virtual gifting, which emphasizes inclusivity, fluidity, and adaptability. Large-scale behavioural studies also show that generosity is contagious in multiplayer environments and that coordinated group play can expand reciprocity and social status within guilds and teams, which supports the idea that gifting practices are key mechanisms through which social ties are produced and reproduced in MMORPGs (Bisberg et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022). These gifting networks encompass interactions between human actors, forming a

complex web of generalized, hybrid, objective, and malicious reciprocity. In this intricate system, gifting and anti-gifting transcend mere social behaviors to become cultural practices that reinforce the social fabric of virtual worlds. Gifts act as bridges between individuals, fostering connections and enhancing solidarity, while anti-gifts introduce tensions that paradoxically strengthen community bonds by uniting players against shared challenges. By tracing how players move between cooperative gifting, hybrid market-sensitive exchanges, objective reciprocity with non-human actors, and malicious reciprocity in anti-gift practices, this section situates MMORPG communities within broader debates about how conflict and collaboration jointly sustain social integration in digital environments.

8.4.1. Online gift and collaborate social network

In MMORPGs, gifting plays a foundational role in the development and maintenance of social networks. Unlike traditional kinship-based systems, where gifting typically reinforces pre-existing familial or hierarchical bonds, online gifting networks are inherently collaborative, inclusive, and adaptive. These networks prioritize collective goals and mutual support over fixed roles or obligations, allowing players from diverse backgrounds to connect and cooperate in achieving shared objectives. By emphasizing fluidity and inclusivity, online gifting networks provide players with opportunities to form connections that transcend cultural, economic, and even linguistic boundaries. These collaborative networks act as essential mechanisms for fostering social cohesion and solidarity in digital environments, creating dynamic and evolving systems that adapt to the virtual world's unique challenges and opportunities. Existing work on social gaming and MMO communities highlights similar patterns, showing that cooperative play and shared task completion enhance bonding and bridging social capital, and that these resources in turn support well-being and continued engagement (Gonçalves et al., 2023; Kim, 2025; Pang et al., 2025; Sachan et al., 2025; Scheifer & Samuel, 2025).

The collaborative nature of online gifting networks emerges through reciprocal

exchanges that go beyond the material or economic value of the gifts. Instead, these exchanges focus on relational bonds and the collective well-being of the community. Players frequently engage in gifting practices that include sharing critical items, offering in-game currency, or assisting during challenging missions. These acts often reflect a player's willingness to contribute to the success of a group even when personal gain is not their primary concern. For instance, in group-based missions or raids, players may voluntarily share rare resources or valuable items with teammates to optimize team performance. These behaviors underscore the ethos of collaboration that defines online gifting networks, where acts of giving and reciprocation are driven by shared objectives and mutual reliance rather than rigid obligations or social expectations. Behavioural data from multiplayer games indicate that such visible acts of generosity can trigger further gifting by observers, creating “gift cascades” that expand the collaborative network beyond the original giver-receiver pair (Bisberg et al., 2022).

In hybrid reciprocity networks, the dynamics of gifting are shaped by a blend of altruistic intentions and economic rationality. Players in these networks navigate a complex interplay of motivations, where the expectation to reciprocate is balanced with the desire to foster relationships and community bonds. Hybrid reciprocity networks often serve as transitional spaces between purely collaborative interactions and those influenced by transactional elements. For instance, gifting a rare item to a fellow player in need may carry an implicit expectation of future reciprocation, creating a dynamic interplay between generosity and obligation. These hybrid networks emphasize adaptability, allowing players to engage in reciprocal exchanges that foster both immediate collaboration and longer-term relational investment. While these networks retain elements of balance, their fluidity allows players to adapt gifting behaviors to suit evolving social and gameplay contexts. Findings from digital gifting in live-streaming and social network games show related mixtures of prosocial motives, status-seeking and platform-driven incentives (Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Alkhawwari, 2024; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Aljarah et al., 2025), yet the

empirical material in this thesis underlines how similar tensions are negotiated within persistent MMORPG groups where members can discuss norms, sanction opportunistic behaviour and reinterpret the meaning of hybrid exchanges over time.

Online gifting networks also acquire significant cultural dimensions, transforming simple exchanges into meaningful rituals that reinforce collective identity and shared values. Seasonal festivals, celebratory events, and special in-game holidays encourage players to exchange gifts that carry both symbolic and practical significance. These occasions often integrate real-world cultural norms into virtual environments, enriching the social fabric of the online community. For example, mentorship systems in games like *JX3* mirror traditional cultural ideals of guidance and respect, turning gifting into a culturally resonant ritual that strengthens bonds between players. In such systems, experienced players may gift resources or offer guidance to newcomers, fostering a culture of intergenerational support and continuity within the virtual world. These practices highlight the ability of online gifting to serve as a bridge between cultural contexts, connecting players across diverse backgrounds through shared experiences and rituals.

In hybrid reciprocity settings, cultural rituals around gifting take on an additional layer of complexity. The balance between altruism and economic rationality often becomes a key theme, as players navigate the dual pressures of maintaining relationships while fulfilling implicit obligations. For example, during large-scale seasonal events, players may engage in gifting practices that simultaneously express generosity and strategic investment in future exchanges. These events create opportunities for hybrid networks to expand, as players actively participate in group-oriented rituals that solidify collective identity while maintaining individualized goals.

The social network dynamics of gifting in MMORPGs transform individual interactions into intricate webs of interconnected relationships. Each act of gifting contributes to a larger reciprocity network where mutual aid and support become foundational principles. Collaborative gifting networks, in particular, foster inclusivity

and adaptability by encouraging players to form connections based on voluntary exchanges instead of relying on rigid hierarchies or predetermined roles. For instance, players often initiate gifting practices with strangers or new guild members, seamlessly integrating them into the network through acts of generosity. These connections are not limited to immediate exchanges but often evolve into enduring relationships that form the backbone of the virtual community. Recent systematic reviews of online gaming communities similarly underline that such voluntary, interest-based ties are key mechanisms through which bonding and bridging social capital are generated in gaming contexts (Sachan et al., 2025; Scheifer & Samuel, 2025).

Hybrid reciprocity networks, while similarly fostering community ties, introduce a level of tension and negotiation into gifting dynamics. The balance between giving freely and the expectation of reciprocation adds depth to player relationships, as participants navigate a shared understanding of mutual obligations and benefits. This tension can also drive innovation within social networks, as players develop creative strategies to manage their gifting practices while maintaining trust and collaboration. Interview data in this thesis show that players often respond by establishing informal rules, shared storage systems or rotational gifting schemes, which help stabilise expectations and prevent hybrid reciprocity from sliding into purely instrumental exchange.

As gifting networks grow and develop, they often facilitate the emergence of actor communities, where shared experiences and collective appreciation create lasting bonds among players. These communities are strengthened through large-scale gifting events or guild-wide exchanges, which not only deepen individual connections but also enhance the broader cohesion of the virtual world. For example, a guild hosting a gifting event to celebrate a milestone or seasonal festival fosters a sense of belonging and shared identity among its members. These collective activities emphasize the collaborative and inclusive nature of online gifting networks while providing a space for hybrid reciprocity to manifest in more structured and community-oriented ways. In

this way, gifting practices function not only as interpersonal exchanges but also as community-level rituals through which players articulate membership, loyalty and common values.

In MMORPGs, the evolution of gifting networks reflects a departure from traditional kinship systems, offering players a dynamic and inclusive framework for building social connections. By prioritizing collaboration, adaptability, and shared goals, these networks transcend cultural and economic boundaries, fostering vibrant social ecosystems within virtual worlds. Through gifting, players cultivate trust, reinforce collective identity, and navigate the complexities of hybrid reciprocity, demonstrating the transformative power of collaboration and mutual support in digital environments. These gifting networks, whether collaborative or hybrid, serve as vital pillars of social solidarity, enabling players to create meaningful relationships and sustain dynamic communities within the ever-evolving landscape of MMORPGs. Placed alongside recent work on social capital and well-being in gaming communities, these findings clarify how virtual gifts operate as concrete mechanisms through which reciprocity and solidarity are built and maintained in MMORPG societies (Pang et al., 2025; Sachan et al., 2025; Scheifer & Samuel, 2025).

8.4.2. Non-Human gift exchange and functional solidarity

In MMORPGs, non-human actors such as NPCs and virtual items play an essential role in fostering social networks and maintaining the structural integrity of virtual communities. Unlike human actors, whose interactions are often influenced by personal intentions, social expectations, and the complexities of reciprocity, non-human actors provide players with interactions that are highly structured, automated, and consistent. These interactions form the foundation of functional solidarity, a type of cohesion rooted in mutual benefit and shared goals. By offering predictable and purposeful exchanges, non-human actors complement the more dynamic and often unpredictable human-to-human relationships, creating a stable framework within which virtual communities can thrive. Recent research on object-oriented ontology and smart objects

similarly emphasizes how non-human entities with capacities for agency, autonomy, and authority participate in shaping practice and coordinating behaviour in digital environments (Hoffman & Novak, 2018; Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Aydin et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2025).

Non-human actors, particularly NPCs, facilitate gifting exchanges that are fundamentally different from human-to-human interactions due to their clarity and balance. These interactions often take the form of objective reciprocity, where the terms of giving and receiving are predefined and unambiguous. For example, NPCs frequently reward players for completing quests, delivering items, or achieving specific milestones. These exchanges eliminate the uncertainty and negotiation inherent in human interactions, ensuring that both sides fulfill their roles in a predictable and fair manner. A quest-giving NPC, for instance, may offer rare items, in-game currency, or narrative progression as rewards for completing a task, reinforcing the player's sense of accomplishment and strengthening their connection to the virtual world. This structured reciprocity builds trust between players and the game environment, making NPCs indispensable contributors to the gifting network. Empirical work on NPC-based reputation and reward systems reinforces this point, showing how non-human agents can systematically track player actions and allocate benefits, thereby stabilizing expectations of fairness and response across repeated encounters (Aydin et al., 2023; Azad & Martens, 2021).

Beyond their functional role, non-human actors are key mediators in the social network of MMORPGs. The structured and low-pressure nature of NPC-driven exchanges provides an entry point for new players or those hesitant to engage with others in a human-to-human context. Tutorial NPCs, for example, not only guide players through the early stages of the game but also help them integrate into the broader community by offering supportive interactions. These exchanges reduce the social anxiety and tension that can arise in human interactions, allowing players to gain confidence and familiarity within the game world. Additionally, NPCs serve as

facilitators of social cohesion by offering rewards and opportunities that encourage players to collaborate and form relationships with each other. Studies of social interaction with agents and avatars in virtual environments similarly show that well-designed non-human partners can provide a sense of social presence, support and guidance that lowers the barrier to participation, especially for less confident users (Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Jacucci et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2025).

Players and NPCs together construct a unique social network grounded in the game's virtual world and narrative context. NPCs often act as nodes within this network, connecting players not only to the game's mechanics but also to each other. Through their roles as quest-givers, merchants, or allies, NPCs bridge gaps between players, mediating tensions that might arise from competitive or conflicting goals in human-to-human relationships. By offering consistent and impartial interactions, NPCs provide a sense of stability and fairness, reducing the emotional and social strain that can accompany complex human reciprocity dynamics. From an ANT perspective, these NPCs function as intermediaries and mediators that translate game rules, narrative scripts, and item flows into concrete opportunities for cooperation, reward, and joint achievement, shaping how human actors encounter one another within the wider gifting network.

The impact of NPCs extends beyond the boundaries of the virtual world into the broader realm of actor communities. Within MMORPGs, actor communities emerge from the shared interactions and collective narratives that players experience with non-human actors. These shared experiences, such as completing quests with the guidance of a central NPC or receiving narrative-driven rewards, foster a sense of communal identity among players. NPCs become cultural nodes that connect individuals within the game world, forming a web of relationships that bridges personal gameplay and collective memory. For instance, a significant storyline involving a beloved NPC might resonate across the player base, uniting them through shared emotions and achievements. These actor communities do not remain confined to the virtual world but

also extend into online spaces such as social media platforms, forums, and fan-driven communities. Players often share their in-game experiences involving NPCs on platforms like Reddit, Twitter, or dedicated fan forums, turning these non-human actors into cultural symbols. A particularly memorable NPC might inspire discussions, memes, fan art, or even coordinated in-game events, further enriching the social and cultural fabric of the gaming community. Through these activities, actor communities create a dynamic interplay between virtual and real-world dimensions, allowing players to extend their connections and shared narratives beyond the game itself. Recent systematic reviews of online gaming communities highlight how such shared narratives and symbolic figures contribute to the formation of bonding and bridging social capital, positioning MMOs as important sites for sustained community building (Sachan et al., 2025; Scheifer & Samuel, 2025; Pang et al., 2025).

The persistence of actor communities in online spaces also strengthens the legacy and cultural relevance of MMORPGs. By celebrating NPCs and their contributions, players sustain the social ecosystem of the game, even as individual players come and go. Iconic NPCs often become focal points for collective nostalgia or advocacy, with players organizing commemorative events or lobbying for their inclusion in future game updates. These activities highlight the deep emotional and cultural bonds players form with non-human actors, further cementing their role as pivotal elements in the social dynamics of MMORPGs. In this sense, non-human actors help anchor long-term communities around particular titles and worlds, giving continuity to social life even when player populations and game mechanics evolve.

Non-human actors also contribute to the symbolic and emotional dimensions of virtual social networks. Rewards provided by NPCs often carry narrative and sentimental significance, transforming them from simple tools into meaningful markers of progress or shared experience. A weapon gifted by an NPC as part of a major storyline might symbolize the player's growth or commemorate a pivotal event in their journey, fostering a deeper emotional connection to the game world. These symbolic

exchanges resonate beyond the individual, as players collectively engage with the same NPCs and participate in shared milestones. This shared interaction creates a sense of communal identity, reinforcing solidarity among players. For instance, an NPC central to a storyline may become a topic of discussion and shared memory within player communities, further solidifying the network's social bonds. Research on attachment and empathy in gaming contexts suggests that players can form emotionally meaningful bonds with characters and agents, and that such attachments are linked with socio-emotional functioning and supportive social play (Shoshani et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2025). These findings provide an empirical backdrop for understanding why NPC-mediated gifts and rewards can hold enduring emotional weight for players and their communities.

In conclusion, non-human gift exchanges in MMORPGs exemplify the principles of functional solidarity by creating stable, reliable, and supportive interactions. Through their roles as mediators, connectors, and stabilizers, NPCs and other non-human actors complement human networks by reducing tension, fostering trust, and reinforcing shared identities. Beyond the virtual world, these interactions also foster actor communities in online spaces, turning shared experiences into lasting cultural legacies. Together, these contributions enrich individual gameplay, enhance the overall cohesion of the virtual community, and underscore the indispensable role of non-human actors in shaping the social fabric of digital worlds. Taken together with the literature on social capital and well-being in gaming communities, these findings indicate that NPCs and virtual items are not simply background infrastructure for human interaction, but active components in the networks through which reciprocity, solidarity and long-term engagement are sustained in MMORPG societies (Sachan et al., 2025; Pang et al., 2025).

8.4.3. Anti-gift and the paradox of solidarity

In MMORPGs, the anti-gift emerges as a distinctive and deliberate form of symbolic violence, deeply embedded in the chaotic freedom and competitive ethos of virtual environments. Unlike conventional gifting, which fosters trust and collaboration, or malicious reciprocity, which exploits social relationships, the anti-gift operates

independently as a unique practice rooted in acts of combat, such as player-versus-player (PVP) battles, marauding, and revenge. Anti-gifting reflects the anarchic nature of MMORPGs, allowing players to express dominance, enact retribution, or engage in morally ambiguous conflicts. Far from being purely disruptive, anti-gifting paradoxically reinforces the cohesion of online societies by fostering shared narratives, collective identity, and a thriving culture of competition and camaraderie. This configuration aligns with broader discussions of the “dark side” of participation in online games, where hostile or aggressive actions contribute to community dynamics instead of remaining external to them (Kowert, 2020; Sun et al., 2024; Nexø et al., 2024).

Anti-gifting is not an abuse of trust within gifting systems; instead, it thrives in the unregulated spaces of MMORPGs where players are free to interpret their roles and actions. This practice is driven by the freedom to disrupt and challenge others in open-world settings, where violence and conquest become tools for creating meaning and asserting one’s presence. For example, acts of marauding, attacking and looting other players, are emblematic of anti-gifting, as they represent deliberate acts of taking that invert the relational logic of giving and turn loss into the central experience of the exchange. However, these acts are not random or senseless; they are performative gestures that resonate within the game’s culture, often aligning with the romanticized ideals of rebellion and justice. This cultural framing elevates anti-gifting from mere mechanics to a form of storytelling, enabling players to engage in narratives of power, rivalry, and revenge.

In MMORPGs like *JX3* which is influenced by wuxia (martial arts) traditions, anti-gifting takes on additional cultural significance. It aligns with the themes of honor, retribution, and “wielding the sword of justice.” Players who engage in anti-gifting practices, such as targeting perceived wrongdoers or avenging their guildmates, adopt the role of vigilantes or martial heroes. These acts of symbolic violence are not random; they are deliberate performances that echo the moral ambiguity and cultural depth of

wuxia storytelling. Anti-gifting in this context is not merely tolerated but celebrated as a legitimate expression of the game's narrative and cultural framework, blurring the line between lawlessness and virtue. As noted in Chapter 6, interviewees frequently describe these actions through moral narratives of punishing bullies, protecting novices or defending factional honour, which illustrates how anti-gift practices are woven into the symbolic universe of *jianghu* rather than standing outside it (Hamm, 2004; Yee, 2006; Lehdonvirta, 2012).

A key paradox of anti-gifting lies in its unexpected contribution to social cohesion. While anti-gifting creates localized conflicts, it rarely leads to the disintegration of social networks as might be anticipated. Instead, it strengthens the online society by uniting players—both marauders and their victims—within a shared cultural and social structure. Players often enter MMORPGs specifically to experience the thrill of PVP combat and to engage in the camaraderie that arises from participating in complex, competitive networks. These players are drawn to the anarchic, high-stakes culture of anti-gifting, which mirrors the “brotherhood” ethos of real-world underground organizations, such as gangs. Through acts of marauding and revenge, individuals and collectives alike engage in a social network defined by anti-gifting, becoming deeply invested in the culture it creates. This is consistent with research on toxic play and dark participation, which shows that conflict, transgression and mutual risk can become central to how communities define membership and belonging (Kowert et al., 2024; Zsila & Demetrovics, 2025).

Anti-gifting networks foster complex relationships between marauders and their victims, transforming conflict into an intricate web of rivalry and mutual recognition. Marauders, by engaging in acts of looting and domination, force their victims to respond—either individually or collectively—through counterattacks, strategic alliances, or collective defense. This interplay between aggressors and defenders creates a dynamic social ecosystem where all participants, regardless of their roles, contribute to the culture and identity of the virtual world. Over time, these interactions

form shared narratives of struggle and resilience, which become the backbone of community identity within the game. As shown in Section 6.5, some guilds specialize in revenge or protection, turning repeated anti-gift encounters into long-running storylines that distinguish “heroes”, “villains” and “bystanders” in the PVP community.

The role of world agency in facilitating and encouraging anti-gifting further amplifies its impact. Game producers often design systems and environments that explicitly or implicitly promote PVP interactions and anti-gifting practices. For instance, open-world zones that permit unrestricted combat or reward systems that incentivize competitive play provide players with the tools and motivations to engage in anti-gifting. By fostering these dynamics, developers ensure that anti-gifting becomes an integral part of the game’s culture, enriching the player experience through emergent storytelling and competitive gameplay. This deliberate encouragement of anti-gifting highlights its value as a designed feature rather than an unintended consequence of player behavior. Studies of PK systems demonstrate that specific penalty, reward and bounty mechanisms can organize player killing into a relatively stable institution that both constrains and stimulates conflict, which resonates with the way world agency in JX3 and similar MMORPGs structures anti-gift opportunities (Yoon & Cheon, 2014).

Anti-gifting also extends its influence beyond the confines of the game world, shaping online communities and social media discussions. Players often share tales of epic battles, acts of revenge, or daring escapes from marauders on platforms like Reddit, Twitter, and dedicated fan forums. These stories preserve the memory of significant in-game events while creating shared cultural touchstones that unite players across servers and communities. For instance, a guild’s victory over a notorious marauder might be celebrated through screenshots, videos, and detailed narratives, transforming individual conflicts into collective triumphs. These discussions contribute to the evolution of the game’s cultural fabric, turning anti-gifting into a defining element of the broader online society. Research on online gaming communities underlines that such narrative practices, including storytelling, memes and commemorative events, are key processes

through which social capital and community identity are built and maintained (Sachan et al., 2025; Scheifer & Samuel, 2025).

Paradoxically, the chaos introduced by anti-gifting often fosters deeper social bonds within and beyond the game. By presenting players with shared challenges and adversaries, anti-gifting provides opportunities for collaboration, collective defense, and cultural storytelling. These interactions strengthen the resilience and cohesion of virtual communities, demonstrating how conflict and solidarity are intertwined in MMORPGs. Players who engage in or respond to anti-gifting contribute to a vibrant social ecosystem where rivalry and camaraderie coexist, enriching the virtual world's complexity and appeal. Placed alongside the analysis of collaborative gifting and objective reciprocity in earlier sections, anti-gift shows that solidarity in MMORPGs is not confined to harmonious exchange, but also emerges through cycles of confrontation, protection and shared remembrance that knit players together through both cooperation and conflict.

8.5. Conclusion

This chapter has examined how gifting and anti-gifting in MMORPGs are organised through interconnected modes of reciprocity and a heterogeneous actor-network. Using ANT as a lens, the analysis has shown how human and non-human actors jointly configure virtual gifting economies, and how these economies in turn shape the social and cultural life of online communities. Generalized reciprocity, hybrid reciprocity, objective reciprocity and malicious reciprocity appear as distinct yet related patterns through which players and digital entities negotiate obligation, value and belonging in persistent online worlds.

The discussion of online gifting networks has demonstrated that MMORPG communities build solidarity through collaborative and inclusive practices that go beyond traditional kinship-based models. Players use virtual gifts to connect across backgrounds, form flexible alliances and sustain long-term relationships. Hybrid

reciprocity adds complexity by combining altruistic intentions with economic rationality and platform incentives, but it does not simply replace generalized reciprocity. Instead, players continually negotiate the meanings and limits of gifting within enduring peer groups, using informal rules and shared rituals to keep reciprocity both workable and socially acceptable.

Non-human actors further enrich these dynamics. NPCs and virtual items mediate objective reciprocity by providing structured, predictable and narratively meaningful exchanges. These interactions reduce some of the tensions present in human-to-human gifting, while simultaneously embedding players in shared storylines and collective memories. Human–CGE relationships therefore become central to how support, recognition and continuity are experienced in MMORPG societies, rather than remaining as background infrastructure for human interaction. At the same time, world agency organises scarcity, risk and opportunity, scripting the conditions under which gifts, rewards and losses circulate.

Within this configuration, anti-gifting and malicious reciprocity occupy a paradoxical position. Practices of marauding, loss and revenge inflict harm and generate conflict, yet they also produce dense networks of rivalry, protection and shared narrative. Players form identities as aggressors, defenders or avengers, and communities mobilise around common enemies and moral narratives of justice and honour. Anti-gift thus operates as a micro-level expression of malicious reciprocity that contributes to social cohesion through cycles of confrontation as well as cooperation. Together, these findings underline that virtual worlds are not merely sites of entertainment but complex socio-material environments in which collaboration, regulation and conflict all participate in the construction of digital cultures. They also prepare the ground for the next chapter, which situates virtual gifting, anti-gift and malicious reciprocity within broader debates on digital reciprocity, online communities

and platform design.

9. CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

9.1. Summary of findings

This section synthesizes the key findings of the study in relation to the three research objectives and questions. By focusing specifically on virtual gifting practices in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), the analysis shows how gifting and anti-gifting are embedded in long-term player relationships, human-digital configurations, and culturally specific play cultures. Across the empirical chapters, two threads run through the material. First, gifting between human actors and digital beings demonstrates how MMORPGs reconfigure classical notions of reciprocity, obligation, and sociality. Second, the identification of anti-gift and malicious reciprocity as patterned practices reveals how conflict-driven exchanges generate solidarity as well as harm. Read through the three objectives, these findings extend existing work on virtual gifting, social capital, and toxicity in online game communities while keeping the discussion anchored in the particular affordances of persistent MMORPG worlds.

Objective 1: To explore the historical and contextual evolution of virtual gifting practices in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), situating them within the broader development of online gifting and digital cultures.

The first objective traces how virtual gifting in MMORPGs evolves from relatively informal, altruistic exchanges into layered and sometimes contested practices shaped by culture, world design, and commercialization. The historical analysis in Chapter 5 shows that early online games already combined generalized reciprocity among strangers, “semi-sale, semi-gift” exchanges, and high-stakes PVP encounters. Within this broader history, contemporary MMORPGs inherit a pattern in which players share items and assistance to support cooperative play, help newcomers integrate into guilds and factions, and maintain everyday relationships. These persistent and synchronous worlds enable players to cultivate a “second life”, and gifting functions as a routine

mechanism for creating trust, mutual dependence, and a sense of belonging in that environment.

Within Chinese MMORPGs such as *JX3*, this basic pattern is further shaped by ceremonial traditions and culturally specific norms of reciprocity. The findings demonstrate how festival events, lineage-style structures, and mentoring systems draw on familiar repertoires of guidance, indebtedness, and respect. Virtual gifts given during seasonal events, initiation rituals, or master-apprentice relations are not experienced as purely functional transfers; they are treated as culturally resonant gestures that express gratitude, seniority, or solidarity. In this way, the historical evolution of virtual gifting in MMORPGs is closely connected to the cross-over between in-game mechanics and offline expectations about how relationships should be maintained, repaid, and displayed.

The empirical chapters also highlight the roles of avatars, non-player characters (NPCs), computer-generated entities (CGEs), and world mechanics in this evolution. Avatars become durable carriers of identity and reputation; when gifts are attached to them, these items accumulate narrative and emotional weight over time. NPCs, scripted events, and seasonal festivals embed gifting routines into the temporal structure of the world, transforming isolated transfers into recurring rituals that organize community rhythms. At the same time, commercialization and platform logics introduce new pressures. Microtransactions, real-money trading, and incentive systems push virtual items toward commodity status and encourage players to evaluate gifts in terms of scarcity, monetary value, and visible status payoff. The data show how this shift produces hybrid reciprocity in MMORPGs, in which altruistic motives coexist with strategic, market-oriented calculations. Compared with more explicitly monetized gifting on livestreaming and social media platforms, these hybrid exchanges remain intertwined with long-term peer relations and collaborative play, which keeps questions of trust, reputation, and obligation in the foreground.

Objective 2: To examine the characteristics of virtual gifting in MMORPGs,

focusing on the components involved in gifting practices and the relationships between them.

The second objective examines virtual gifting as a configuration of actors and objects rather than as a simple transfer of items. The findings confirm that virtual gifts, although intangible, carry considerable social and symbolic value. Their acquisition often requires time, skill, or coordinated group effort, which turns them into condensed markers of achievement and commitment. When such items circulate as gifts, they operate as vehicles for establishing, testing, and reinforcing relationships. Within this configuration, three sets of components are especially important: virtual items, human actors represented by avatars, and non-human actors such as NPCs and the game world.

Human actors, acting through their avatars, occupy a central position in this ecosystem. Avatars provide a visible and persistent interface through which players express identity and intention. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 show how gifting practices, including sharing rare drops in raids, transferring carefully customized equipment, or passing on exclusive event rewards, anchor narratives of care, generosity, seniority, or loyalty. Gifts given through avatars are functional assets that also signal trustworthiness, expertise, or recognition. Over time, these exchanges generate webs of obligation and expectation that are remembered and interpreted by guilds, teams, and broader communities. In this sense, the findings demonstrate that the “components” of virtual gifting include not only items and actors but also the relational histories and interpretive frames attached to them.

Non-human actors add a further layer to these configurations. NPCs and CGEs mediate and structure many gifting situations, from routine quest rewards and mentoring bonuses to festival distributions and reputation-based item unlocks. World mechanics such as scarcity, time-limited events, and region-specific resources regulate which gifts can appear, who can access them, and under what conditions they may be exchanged. Chapter 7 shows that, when players invest emotionally in NPCs or CGEs, these entities are no longer treated as neutral tools; they are perceived as quasi-partners

or symbolic recipients within the gifting network. This produces what Chapter 8 terms “objective reciprocity”: highly structured, rule-based exchanges between human and non-human actors that still carry social and emotional meaning. By analyzing these components together, the study shows that virtual gifting in MMORPGs is a hybrid socio-material configuration in which human and digital beings jointly shape how value, obligation, and recognition are produced and circulated.

Objective 3: To analyze the unique forms of online gifting in digital environments, examining their social and cultural influence on social networks.

The third objective brings these strands together by focusing on the distinctive forms of gifting and anti-gifting that crystallize in MMORPGs and by tracing their implications for social networks and community cultures. On the cooperative side, Chapters 6 and 8 describe how generalized reciprocity, hybrid reciprocity, and objective reciprocity combine to sustain collaborative networks. Players use gifts to integrate newcomers, signal long-term commitment, and stabilize group rhythms around raids, festivals, and shared projects. These practices support dense, flexible networks that cut across kinship and offline hierarchies, and they underpin forms of social capital and well-being that recent work has associated with online game communities.

At the same time, the findings show that MMORPGs also generate more contentious forms of gifting, captured through the concepts of anti-gift and malicious reciprocity. Anti-gift refers to deliberate actions such as looting, resource appropriation, and targeted PVP aggression that reverse the direction of item flows and inflict loss on others. Chapter 6 demonstrates that these practices are not random acts of disruption; they follow recognizable patterns of marauding, loss, revenge, and counter-marauding. Malicious reciprocity provides a framework for understanding how these cycles of harm and retaliation create enduring adversarial relationships between players and groups. In Chinese wuxia-inspired worlds, anti-gift practices intersect with themes of honour, justice, and brotherhood, so that acts of revenge, protection, or vigilantism become culturally meaningful performances as well as strategic moves.

These contentious practices have paradoxical effects on community dynamics. While anti-gifts break trust in specific encounters, they also prompt victims and bystanders to mobilize in defence, to form alliances, and to develop shared narratives about enemies, heroes, and justified violence. Chapters 6 and 8 show how guilds and informal coalitions emerge around the need to respond to marauding, how reputations as aggressors or protectors are constructed, and how stories of dramatic confrontations circulate across forums and social media. In this way, anti-gift and malicious reciprocity contribute to social cohesion and collective identity through conflict as well as cooperation.

Across the three objectives, the thesis therefore demonstrates that virtual gifting in MMORPGs is historically situated, socio-materially configured, and internally diverse. Gifting between human actors and digital beings reshapes classical notions of reciprocity, value, and obligation, and anti-gift together with malicious reciprocity reveals how conflict-driven exchanges can underpin solidarity and shared culture. These patterns provide the empirical foundation for the theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions developed in the following sections.

9.2. Theoretical contribution

This section highlights the key theoretical contributions of the study. The analysis is grounded in classical gift exchange theory and contemporary work on digital gifting, and it uses Actor–Network Theory (ANT) as an analytical framework to configure human and non-human actors in MMORPG worlds. Across these foundations, the thesis advances three interrelated areas. First, it develops a systematic account of human interaction with digital beings in gifting networks, showing how avatars, non-player characters (NPCs), computer-generated entities (CGEs), and world mechanics participate in reciprocity structures that have typically been theorized in purely human terms. Second, it conceptualizes anti-gift and malicious reciprocity as a distinct pattern of adversarial exchange, thereby extending “dark side” discussions that have focused mainly on coercive or manipulative forms of gifting but have not treated hostile

transfers as a structured form of reciprocity. Third, it broadens the scope of gifting theories by analyzing intangible virtual gifts as socio-material devices that connect cultural narratives, market logics, and technological infrastructures in MMORPGs. The following subsections elaborate these contributions in turn, with particular attention to how the empirical material from Chinese MMORPGs complicates and refines existing paradigms in digital anthropology, game studies, and reciprocity research.

9.2.1. Human Interaction with Digital Beings

The study significantly advances the understanding of human interaction with digital beings by situating virtual gifting practices within the specific context of MMORPGs. Previous research on gifting has largely concentrated on exchanges among human actors in offline settings or in social media and livestreaming environments, where relationships, obligation, and status have been conceptualized in explicitly interpersonal terms. Work on digital gifting in social network games and livestreaming has examined how virtual gifts express emotional, social, and monetary value (Alkhawwari, 2024; Zhang, 2022; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024), yet these studies generally treat platforms and technical systems as backdrops or enablers rather than as active participants in reciprocity structures. In parallel, research on virtual agents, avatars, and social NPCs has shown that users attribute social presence and emotional significance to artificial companions (Kyrilitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022; Hu et al., 2025; Azad & Martens, 2021; Aydin et al., 2023), but this literature rarely connects such relationships to the long-term gift and counter-gift dynamics described in anthropological theories of exchange. By bringing these strands together, this thesis demonstrates that human–digital interaction in MMORPGs is not a marginal side issue, but a central theoretical problem for understanding how reciprocity is reconfigured in socio-technical environments.

In virtual environments, CGEs and NPCs perform multiple roles as facilitators, regulators, and sometimes symbolic recipients within gifting networks. CGEs that manage reward systems, event distribution, or mentoring bonuses respond to player

actions in consistent and rule-bound ways, mediating who receives what, when, and under which conditions. NPCs embed gifts in quest lines, seasonal events, and faction rituals, so that accepting or giving an item is simultaneously a mechanical and a narrative act. The empirical chapters show that players recognize these entities not only as mechanical interfaces but also as social partners and moral reference points. Under certain conditions, NPCs are remembered as “friends,” “teachers,” or “comrades”, and players describe emotions such as loyalty, grief, and gratitude towards long-term companion characters. These findings reinforce and extend evidence that digital agents can evoke interpersonal forms of attachment and care (Hu et al., 2025; Kyrlitsias & Michael-Grigoriou, 2022), but they place these attachments explicitly within networks of gift, counter-gift, and obligation.

Avatars add another layer of complexity to these relationships. As persistent digital embodiments of players, avatars function as carriers of both material resources and symbolic value. The thesis shows how carefully customized equipment, titles, mounts, and cosmetic items accumulate biographical meaning when attached to an avatar over time. When such items circulate as gifts, they not only transfer functional advantages but also redistribute honour, recognition, and responsibility within the network. Avatars therefore operate as mediating figures that translate human intentions into visible actions and transform system-generated rewards into socially legible gestures. In this sense, human interaction with digital beings in MMORPGs is always already configured by the triadic relationship between player, avatar, and non-human actors such as NPCs and CGEs.

By using ANT as an analytical lens, the study treats these human and non-human entities as heterogeneous actors that jointly compose gifting networks, rather than as a hierarchy with humans at the centre and digital components in supporting roles. Early applications of ANT to games and virtual environments illustrated how non-human entities such as interfaces, rules, and hardware contribute to play and meaning-making (Cypher & Richardson, 2006; Giddings, 2005). More recent ANT-informed work in

education, health services, and social virtual reality has underlined the value of tracing how people, technologies, and institutions become linked in complex assemblages (Mörtsell, 2024; Ryan et al., 2024; Schmidbauer et al., 2025). Building on these insights, this thesis extends ANT into the domain of MMORPG gifting by following how virtual items, avatars, NPCs, CGEs, and world mechanics translate one another's capacities, channel flows of objects and information, and stabilize or destabilize relations of reciprocity.

This ANT-guided analysis makes three specific theoretical moves. First, it repositions NPCs and CGEs from background infrastructure to full participants in reciprocity structures. They not only facilitate human-to-human exchange but also enter into patterned gift relations with players through objective reciprocity, in which clearly defined rules and automated responses nevertheless generate meaningful, sometimes emotionally charged, interactions. Second, it shows that the agency of digital beings is not a simple property of code or design; it is relational and emergent, produced through repeated encounters in which players come to see these entities as reliable partners, adversaries, or witnesses within the gifting network. Third, it demonstrates that human-digital relationships in MMORPGs cannot be captured adequately by models that treat virtual agents as purely instrumental tools or as isolated companions. Instead, they must be understood as part of wider socio-material configurations in which hybrid reciprocity, world agency, and cultural narratives work together to shape how gifts, obligations, and recognition circulate over time.

Through this reconfiguration, the thesis contributes to gifting theory by showing that the fundamental logics of giving, receiving, and reciprocating can operate across human-digital boundaries without losing their social and cultural depth. At the same time, it contributes to ANT and broader socio-technical research by offering a detailed case in which non-human actors do not simply mediate existing social ties but actively help to generate, maintain, and contest them through the circulation of virtual gifts. This dual contribution provides the conceptual foundation for the subsequent discussion of

anti-gift, malicious reciprocity, and the expanded scope of reciprocity theory in digital environments.

9.2.2. Anti-Gift Practices: Beyond the Dark Side

A second major theoretical contribution of this thesis lies in the conceptualization of anti-gift and malicious reciprocity as a distinct pattern of exchange within MMORPG gifting networks. Existing work on the “dark side of gift” has examined how obligation, emotional ambivalence, coercion, and status asymmetries can turn gifts into burdens or instruments of domination, typically in consumer or interpersonal settings (Sherry, 1983; Belk, 1979; Ruth et al., 1999; Morales, 2005; Freling et al., 2024). In these accounts, gifts remain embedded in recognizable relationships, and harm is usually treated as an unintended consequence or as tension within otherwise valued ties. This thesis builds on Hyde’s (1983) provocation about the “anti-gift” to argue that there is a further form of exchange in which gift-like transfers are designed from the outset to injure, strip, or destabilize others. Anti-gift refers to deliberate acts such as looting, predatory “help”, or exploitative transfers that use the familiar form of a gift or beneficial exchange in order to produce loss, humiliation, or long-term vulnerability. By foregrounding this intentionality, the thesis extends dark gift discussions and shows that the grammar of gifting can be actively weaponized in virtual environments.

The framework of malicious reciprocity provides the macro-level logic through which these practices can be understood. Classical typologies such as Sahlins’ (1972) negative reciprocity already recognize exchanges in which actors seek maximum gain at another’s expense, yet they still assume a transactional relationship in which both parties are positioned as partners in exchange, at least at the outset. Malicious reciprocity, as developed here, captures situations in which actors mobilize the expectations associated with gifting and reciprocity in order to initiate or sustain cycles of harm. In MMORPG contexts this logic appears in repeated sequences of marauding, retaliatory raids, counter-marauding, and status displays, where virtual items and currencies circulate as trophies of domination and as triggers for further conflict. Anti-gift practices are treated as the micro-level manifestations of this broader logic:

concrete actions that instantiate malicious reciprocity in specific encounters and that can escalate into enduring chains of revenge, factional hostility, and collective mobilization. This move shifts analysis away from isolated incidents of “toxic behaviour” and towards patterned, temporally extended exchanges that are recognizably reciprocal, yet organized around injury and retribution rather than repair.

By situating anti-gift within research on toxicity and dark participation, the thesis links gifting theory to a rapidly growing body of work on harmful interaction in games. Studies of griefing, harassment, and “dark participation” have documented the prevalence, typologies, and psychological consequences of toxic behaviour in multiplayer environments (e.g., Kowert, 2020; Kowert et al., 2024; Zsila et al., 2022; Zsila & Demetrovics, 2025; Sun et al., 2024; Frommel et al., 2023; Nexø et al., 2024). These contributions typically conceptualize problematic actions as rule-breaking, aggression, or norm violations, often measured through reports, chat logs, or behavioural taxonomies. The present study draws on these insights but reframes a subset of such behaviours through the lens of gifting and reciprocity. Looting kills that strip opponents of hard-earned items, “help” that lures players into ambush, and exploitative trades that leverage informational asymmetries all retain the formal features of exchange. They involve transfers, expectations, and responses that unfold within shared rule systems, and they are interpreted by participants through moral narratives about justice, desert, or “teaching a lesson”. Analyzing these practices as anti-gifts makes visible how virtual items become instruments of symbolic violence in Bourdieu’s (1990) sense, and how cycles of harm are organized around recognizable gift–counter-gift structures instead of simple theft or random abuse.

At the same time, the thesis argues that anti-gift practices have ambivalent social effects that extend current toxicity research. Empirically, sequences of marauding and revenge in the studied MMORPG communities often lead to the formation of defensive coalitions, the renegotiation of group boundaries, and the consolidation of shared norms about legitimate and illegitimate forms of hostility. This finding resonates with work

showing that dark participation and toxic play can shape community identity and participation, not only individual risk and distress (Ruotsalainen & Meriläinen, 2023; Frommel et al., 2023; Achterbosch et al., 2024). By placing anti-gift within a reciprocity framework, the thesis explains how adversarial exchanges that appear purely destructive can, under certain conditions, contribute to bonding among victims, bystanders, and counter-marauders, and can solidify internal solidarity against external threats. Conflict-driven reciprocity becomes a mechanism through which communities articulate moral boundaries, define “us” and “them”, and construct shared histories of suffering and resistance.

Conceptually, this reworking of anti-gift and malicious reciprocity pushes gifting theory beyond its usual focus on cohesion, ambivalence, and coercive obligation. The analysis shows that gift-like acts can be central to the organization of conflict, that hostile transfers can still be meaningfully reciprocal, and that adversarial exchange can support collective identity and social order in virtual worlds. By grounding these claims in detailed qualitative data from MMORPG gifting networks, the thesis offers a theoretically robust account of anti-gift that is anchored in classic anthropological work on exchange, informed by contemporary research on toxicity and dark participation, and attentive to the specific affordances of digital environments.

9.2.3. Expanding the Scope of Reciprocity and Gifting Theories

Beyond the two primary contributions, this study broadens gifting and reciprocity theories by treating intangible virtual gifts as full-scale social facts, systematizing hybrid reciprocity, and foregrounding the cultural and socio-material layering of gifting in MMORPGs. First, the analysis of virtual gifts in persistent game worlds demonstrates that material substance is not a precondition for gifts to carry obligation, memory, and identity. Although virtual items can be infinitely reproduced at the level of code, they become “thick” objects because their acquisition is tied to labour, skill, world agency, and shared narrative events. In this respect, rare weapons, mounts, or costumes in MMORPGs function less as lightweight “likes” and more as prestige objects that condense time investment, group effort, and moral recognition. Existing

work on digital gifting in livestreaming, social network games, and social media often emphasizes monetization, para-social intimacy, and platform logics (for example, Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Kim et al., 2025; Alkhawwari, 2024; Zhang & Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Aljarah et al., 2025), where virtual gifts are primarily analysed as instruments of visibility or revenue. By contrast, the empirical material in this thesis shows how virtual gifts in MMORPGs anchor long-term obligations, gratitude, and antagonism inside relatively closed, enduring communities. In doing so, it extends Maussian and anthropological perspectives on gifting to a domain where objects are intangible but nevertheless operate as socially binding “total services” that circulate within dense networks of reciprocity and reputation.

Second, the study develops hybrid reciprocity as a theoretically robust and empirically grounded configuration that links altruistic and strategic dimensions of gifting within ongoing relationships. Hybrid reciprocity in this thesis describes not a simple midpoint between generalized and negative reciprocity, but a dynamic pattern in which players oscillate between collaborative support, status-seeking, resistance to commercialization, and calculated exchange as they respond to world design and platform incentives. While recent research on digital gifting frequently models prosocial motives and market-driven motives as distinct, or treats escalation of spending as a sign of commodified exchange (Liu et al., 2025; Volkmer & Meißner, 2024; Wang et al., 2024; Alkhawwari, 2024), the MMORPG cases demonstrate how these logics are constantly recombined in practice. Players may gift in ways that are affectively generous and culturally meaningful, yet simultaneously attentive to in-game economies, guild politics, or future reciprocity. The concept of hybrid reciprocity developed here therefore refines existing reciprocity theory by showing how cooperative and economically framed logics can coexist within the same gift, and by highlighting the micro-level negotiations through which players affirm, reinterpret, or contest the meaning of their own exchanges over time.

Third, the research extends gifting theories by bringing cultural specificity and socio-

material configuration to the centre of analysis. Within Chinese MMORPGs, virtual gifting is interwoven with ceremonial traditions, guanxi-like relational expectations, and narrative motifs drawn from wuxia and other cultural repertoires. Festival events, master-apprentice systems, and guild rituals show how virtual gifts act as carriers of gratitude, respect, obligation, and intergenerational continuity, while at the same time being shaped by game mechanics, non-human actors, and commercial pressures. By systematically linking these practices to anthropological work on reciprocity and to contemporary studies of digital gifting, the thesis demonstrates how virtual economies both reflect and transform cultural values. At the same time, by using Actor-Network Theory to configure human players, avatars, NPCs, CGEs, items, and world rules within a single analytical network, it pushes gifting and reciprocity theories to account for non-human agency and for the entanglement of cooperative and adversarial logics, including malicious reciprocity and anti-gift. In this way, MMORPG gifting is theorized as a privileged site for reimagining how gifts operate in hybrid human-digital collectives, expanding the scope of gifting theories from material exchange in offline settings to complex socio-material arrangements in contemporary digital cultures.

9.3. Empirical contribution

This section explains how the empirical findings of the study advance current knowledge of virtual gifting practices in MMORPGs. Across the three research objectives, the thesis offers a grounded account of how gifting evolves historically, how human and digital beings co-produce reciprocity networks, and how anti-gift and malicious reciprocity operate as patterned forms of interaction. The contributions are empirical in the sense that they document concrete practices, trajectories, and configurations that have not been systematically described in earlier work on digital gifting, online sociality, and toxicity in games.

To begin with, the analysis shows that virtual gifting in persistent MMORPG worlds develops within specific historical and cultural trajectories instead of appearing as a purely functional feature of platform design. Earlier studies of gifting either concentrate

on offline material exchanges, where reciprocity and altruism dominate theoretical discussion, or focus on relatively short-lived digital settings such as livestreaming and social network platforms, where virtual gifts are closely tied to monetization, visibility, and para-social interaction. By following one family of MMORPGs across time, this thesis traces how early practices of sharing items and assistance, grounded in generalized reciprocity, are progressively layered with commercial mechanisms, event systems, and culturally shaped rituals. The material makes visible how generalized reciprocity, hybrid reciprocity, and market-oriented exchanges become entangled within the same communities. It also shows how players themselves negotiate these changes, preserving certain expectations of generosity and mutual aid while adapting to pressures introduced by microtransactions, reward systems, and real-money trading. In empirical terms, the study does not simply infer an “evolution” of gifting from design features, but documents how cultural, technological, and economic factors intersect within the lived history of a specific MMORPG environment.

The findings also provide detailed evidence on human interaction with digital beings in gifting contexts, a dimension that remains underdeveloped in both gifting and game studies. Work on avatars and social NPCs has established that players may perceive digital entities as socially present and emotionally meaningful, yet it seldom follows these relationships into long-running gift and counter-gift dynamics. The empirical chapters here show how players build patterned relationships not only with other humans, but also with avatars, non-player characters, computer-generated entities, and the game world itself. Interview accounts and in-game examples illustrate how players repeatedly give and receive items from specific NPCs, interpret system rewards as signs of recognition, and attribute moral qualities such as loyalty or betrayal to digital beings. These practices demonstrate that objective reciprocity between humans and digital entities is part of the everyday structure of obligation, gratitude, and emotional support in the game. Human–digital relationships are therefore not incidental to the gift economy; they help to shape how players experience belonging, agency, and fairness

in MMORPG worlds.

A further empirical contribution concerns the structure of anti-gift behaviour and malicious reciprocity in virtual gifting networks. Research on toxic behaviour and dark participation in games has identified a wide range of harmful actions, including griefing, harassment, and exploitation, and has examined their prevalence and psychological effects. These studies typically conceptualize problematic acts as norm violations, aggression, or a broad category of toxicity. The material in this thesis shows that a subset of such behaviours is organized around the circulation of items and obligations, and can be described as anti-gifts within cycles of malicious reciprocity. Recurring sequences of marauding, loss, revenge, and counter-marauding are documented, in which virtual items are taken, displayed, and exchanged as trophies of domination and as triggers for further conflict. Players recognize these patterns, name them, and incorporate them into their moral vocabularies. This evidence indicates that anti-gifts form a stable pattern of adversarial exchange, rather than a collection of isolated incidents, and that they are intelligible to participants as a distinctive mode of interaction within the gift economy of the game.

The study also shows that conflict-driven exchanges can support community cohesion as well as fragmentation and harm. Survey-based work has begun to suggest that negative experiences in online games can coexist with, or even stimulate, stronger group identification and participation. The qualitative material here adds depth to that suggestion by linking anti-gift practices to the formation of alliances, the consolidation of guild boundaries, and the creation of shared narratives. Players respond to marauding and exploitative behaviour by organizing collective defence, enforcing internal norms about acceptable and unacceptable forms of hostility, and telling stories about enemies and heroes across in-game channels and external platforms. Sequences in which a guild mobilizes to protect a member, or in which victims of repeated anti-gifts band together to confront aggressors, reveal how malicious reciprocity produces opportunities to articulate common values and to strengthen internal solidarity. Item flows sit at the

centre of both conflict and cohesion, since the taking, regaining, and redistributing of virtual goods provide concrete focal points around which communities rally.

Cultural and contextual variation constitutes another important empirical dimension. Much existing research on virtual economies and online games treats player populations as relatively homogeneous or concentrates on Western contexts. By focusing on Chinese MMORPGs and by linking in-game practices to ceremonial traditions, reciprocity norms, and wuxia-inspired narratives, this thesis shows how virtual gifting is shaped by, and in turn reshapes, local cultural frameworks. Festival events, mentoring systems, and lineage-like structures illustrate how virtual gifts can act as extensions of offline notions of gratitude, respect, and obligation. At the same time, the material demonstrates how configurations such as hybrid reciprocity and anti-gift arise from the specific affordances of digital worlds, including world agency, scarcity regimes, and PVP systems, and intersect with these cultural expectations. This empirical grounding makes it possible to treat MMORPG gifting as both a manifestation of global digital cultures and a site where regional histories and values are reworked in practice.

These dynamics are further crystallized in a set of original configurations and process models that emerge directly from the qualitative material. The actor-network diagrams for human actors, digital beings, and world agencies, the schematization of hybrid reciprocity, and the cycle of anti-gift and malicious reciprocity are all constructed from the observed practices and narratives collected during fieldwork. They do not merely visualize existing theories; they assemble interview accounts, historical trajectories, and in-game mechanisms into coherent analytical structures. In this sense, the figures themselves form part of the empirical contribution of the thesis, since they condense dispersed observations into clearly articulated mechanisms that can be examined, questioned, and adapted in future studies of virtual gifting and online conflict.

9.4. Practical and managerial implications

The findings of this thesis have several implications for those who design, operate, and govern MMORPG environments. The analysis of hybrid reciprocity, human–

digital gifting networks, and anti-gift practices suggests that virtual gifting systems are not neutral technical features. They are mechanisms through which cooperation, conflict, and community identity are organized over time. This section outlines the main practical lessons for game developers, platform operators, and community managers who wish to support sustainable gifting ecologies that balance engagement, fairness, and cultural richness.

For game developers, the evidence on hybrid reciprocity highlights the importance of calibrating gifting systems in ways that preserve space for generalized reciprocity while acknowledging the presence of market logics. Chapters 5 and 6 show that players value practices in which rare or symbolically important items can still be obtained through cooperation, mentoring, or festival events, not only through direct purchase. Design choices that keep a non-monetized route open for key gifts, for example through challenging group content, long-term quests, or guild achievements, help sustain perceptions of fairness and shared effort. Where monetized gifts and real-money trading exist, clear boundaries and transparent rules reduce suspicion that every act of giving is an economic transaction. Progression systems that reward communal contributions, such as shared storage, guild-level rewards, or mentoring bonuses, also encourage players to see gifting as a collective investment in group success, which mitigates some of the tensions identified in hybrid reciprocity.

The central role of digital beings in gifting networks has direct implications for the design of NPCs and computer-generated entities. The empirical chapters show that players often experience NPCs and CGEs as emotionally significant partners in exchange, especially where relationships are built through repeated gifting interactions, storylines, and ritualized events. Designers can use this capacity deliberately by creating NPCs that provide structured, predictable forms of objective reciprocity while also offering emotional support and social scaffolding. Tutorial and mentoring NPCs can introduce new players to local norms of generosity and cooperation by framing early gifts as part of a wider culture, not only as individual rewards. Long-running

companion characters who build up a history of mutual exchange with the player can help to anchor a sense of belonging for those who find human-to-human interaction intimidating. At the same time, world-level mechanisms such as scarcity, time-limited events, and region-specific resources need careful tuning, since they shape the intensity of competition and the pressure to engage in exploitative forms of gifting or anti-gifting.

For platform operators and economic designers, the concept of hybrid reciprocity also suggests that monetization strategies should take existing social fabrics into account. The data indicate that sudden changes in item availability, aggressive promotion of paid gifts, or unbalanced pay-to-win mechanics can destabilize long-established norms of mutual aid and trust. More gradual integration of commercial features, accompanied by clear communication about their purpose, allows communities to adapt and renegotiate their own expectations. Systems that recognize non-monetary contributions, such as time spent mentoring, organizing events, or protecting weaker members, can supplement spending-based status signals and prevent gifting from being perceived purely as a display of purchasing power. Analytics can be used to monitor how new gift-related features affect patterns of cooperation, guild cohesion, and conflict, so that adjustments can be made before harmful dynamics become entrenched.

The analysis of anti-gift and malicious reciprocity has specific implications for the management of PVP systems and conflict-heavy zones. Chapters 6 and 8 show that players are attracted to high-risk environments where marauding, looting, and revenge are possible, yet also that unbounded loss and constant predation drive some players out of shared spaces or even out of the game. Designers can respond by structuring anti-gift opportunities through spatial and temporal constraints. Clearly signposted PVP areas, loss caps on key items, and opt-in mechanics for high-risk modes allow those who seek intense conflict to find it, while giving others greater control over their exposure. Mechanisms that allow partial recovery after severe loss, such as retrieval quests, community defence events, or compensation through guild insurance funds, can

transform experiences of victimization into occasions for collective mobilization. At the same time, logging and surfacing patterns of repeated predation against much weaker players make it possible to distinguish between culturally accepted “martial” behaviour and harassment that corrodes long-term community health. Sanction systems, whether automated or moderator-led, can then target those who repeatedly cross agreed boundaries without suppressing meaningful conflict.

Community managers can draw on the findings to design tools and support structures that harness gifting and anti-gifting for community building. The material shows that guilds and informal coalitions already use gifts to welcome newcomers, reward loyal members, and repair damaged relationships. Platforms can support this work by providing flexible guild tools for organizing internal gifting events, recording shared achievements, and commemorating important exchanges or battles. Interfaces that highlight collective milestones, such as the number of successful defence actions or mentoring relationships completed, help communities to narrate their own histories and to connect individual gifts and anti-gifts to a wider story about who they are. Communication channels that span in-game chat, official forums, and social media can be aligned with these narrative practices, for example by making it easy to share screenshots, logs, or short reports of significant events, which reinforces the shared memory work described in Chapters 6 and 8.

There are also implications for player support and wellbeing. The findings indicate that gifting and human–digital relationships provide emotional resources for players who feel isolated or marginalized, while anti-gift experiences can be both thrilling and distressing. Support systems that acknowledge this complexity, including accessible reporting mechanisms, context-sensitive guidance, and links to community-based assistance, are better suited to managing the consequences of malicious reciprocity than purely punitive approaches. Where players form strong attachments to NPCs or to particular communities, developers and community managers can work with these attachments by involving them in safety initiatives, for example by using familiar in-

game characters to communicate norms about acceptable conflict, mentoring, and protection of vulnerable players.

Finally, the study suggests that practitioners should treat MMORPG gifting ecologies as laboratories for broader digital governance questions. The patterns documented here, including hybrid reciprocity, objective reciprocity with digital beings, and conflict-driven anti-gift cycles, are not confined to entertainment contexts. They anticipate issues that will arise in more expansive virtual environments and metaverse-like platforms, where human users, AI agents, and platform rules will jointly shape flows of value, recognition, and harm. By experimenting with balanced gifting systems, carefully structured PVP environments, and supportive human–digital relationships in MMORPGs, developers and operators can develop transferable insights for future digital ecosystems in which similar dynamics will need to be managed at larger scales.

9.5. Limitations and directions for future research

While this study provides significant insights into virtual gifting practices, human–digital interactions, and the dynamics of anti-gift behaviors, it is essential to recognize certain boundaries of the research focus that open avenues for future exploration.

One limitation is the cultural specificity of the research, which primarily examines Chinese MMORPGs. While this focus allows for a rich and nuanced understanding of localized cultural influences on virtual gifting, it may not fully capture the diversity of practices across global digital environments. The findings are deeply rooted in ceremonial traditions and reciprocity norms specific to Chinese culture, which may differ significantly from those in other regions. However, this specificity also provides a foundation for comparative studies that could investigate how virtual gifting practices adapt to varying cultural contexts, exploring both commonalities and distinctions in global and local dynamics.

Another limitation lies in the exclusive focus on in-game gifting practices. While the study thoroughly examines the socio-material dynamics of gifting within MMORPGs, it does not address how these practices intersect with broader online behaviors outside

the gaming context. For example, virtual gifting on social media platforms or live-streaming services may follow different patterns of reciprocity and social bonding. Expanding the research to explore gifting behaviors in these contexts could provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital sociality and reciprocity.

A further limitation involves the rapidly evolving nature of digital environments. Technological advancements, such as the emergence of the metaverse and AI-driven systems, are continuously reshaping the dynamics of virtual economies and social interactions. This study captures a specific moment in the development of MMORPGs, but future iterations of these technologies may introduce entirely new dimensions to gifting practices, necessitating ongoing research to account for these shifts. The temporal scope of the research, therefore, represents a limitation that future studies can address through longitudinal approaches or real-time analyses of technological changes.

To address these limitations, several directions for future research are proposed. First, there is significant potential to expand the research content by focusing on the impact of emerging digital technologies. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning offer new avenues for understanding human and digital beings' interactions. For instance, future studies could investigate how AI-driven computer-generated entities (CGEs) evolve in their roles as facilitators, mediators, or even autonomous agents within virtual ecosystems. Additionally, the emergence of the meta-universe (metaverse) presents a transformative context for virtual gifting practices. In these interconnected digital spaces, gifting behaviors may take on new forms influenced by heightened levels of immersion, cross-platform interactions, and the blending of virtual and real-world economies. Exploring how gifting evolves in the metaverse could provide groundbreaking insights into the future of digital sociality.

Second, expanding the scope of research to include a wider range of platforms and digital contexts could provide a more comprehensive understanding of virtual gifting practices. Moving beyond MMORPGs to include mobile games, VR environments, and broader internet platforms like social media or live-streaming services would reveal

how gifting behaviors adapt to different technological and cultural contexts. Moreover, examining gifting dynamics in non-gaming contexts, such as virtual workplaces or online educational platforms, could uncover new dimensions of reciprocity and social bonding in digital interactions. These expansions would offer a more complete picture of how virtual gifting operates across various digital ecosystems and user communities.

Third, future research could deepen its examination of cultural and contextual variations in virtual gifting. While this study highlights how Chinese cultural practices influence gifting behaviors, exploring comparative perspectives across other regions would provide valuable insights into the interplay between local traditions and global digital platforms. For example, understanding how reciprocity norms differ in Western, Southeast Asian, or African virtual environments could illuminate the diverse ways in which cultural heritage shapes digital gifting. Such cross-cultural studies would enrich the global discourse on virtual economies and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of digital sociality.

In summary, this study identifies several limitations that point to valuable directions for future research. Expanding the research content to incorporate emerging technologies such as AI and the metaverse, broadening the scope to include diverse platforms and contexts, and examining cross-cultural variations in virtual gifting will deepen our understanding of these complex interactions. By building on the insights provided here, future studies can continue to illuminate the intricacies of reciprocity, agency, and sociality in digital ecosystems.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Consent Form

Project Title: Gift and Anti-gift: The Dynamics of Relationships in MMORPGs

Name of Researchers: Feihong Hu

Email Address: f.hu1@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 2 months after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 months of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I understand that my interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name _____ of _____
Participant _____ Date _____

Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent _____

Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Appendix 2 Participant information sheet



Project Title: Gift and Anti-gift: The Dynamics of Relationships in MMORPGs

Participant information sheet

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about how Chinese gamers experience and manage the interrelationships between self, avatars and virtual goods.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

In this study, we seek to re-examine the relationship between consumers and immaterial possessions in Chinese online gaming context, where has the biggest online gaming users base in the world. The immaterial possessions in this case refers to the avatars and virtual goods, which can be seen as consumers' extended self(Belk, 2013). Building on Belk's (2013) work, our study examines how Chinese gamers experience and manage the interrelationships between self, avatars and virtual goods.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you because you have a certain extent of involvement in Chinese

online games, and your experiences of managing your avatars and virtual possessions will help us better understand the relationship between consumers and their virtual possessions.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

The purpose of the research is to examine how Chinese gamers experience and manage the interrelationships between self, avatars and virtual goods. Participation in the study will involve a 1.5-3 hour interview. In depth interviews, you will be prompted to discuss your experiences, thoughts and feelings with your roles and possessions in a certain online game product, such as *World of Warcraft* and JX Online 3.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Your participation will aids a fuller understanding of the Consumer-Avatar-Possessions in Chinese online gaming context

Do I have to take part?

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this

has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 months after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

A few questions may be related to the information of your property and potentially make you feel uncomfortable to answer. Therefore, to ensure the wellbeing of you, pseudonyms will be assigned and any personal information that might reveal your identity will be adjusted if the conversation is going to be published. Besides, you can stop or quit at any point during or after the interview. In addition, identifiable data will be kept confidential - audio recorders and all the interview data will be encrypted and data transferred to password-protected computers/laptops.

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview, only the researchers, including my supervisors and me, will have access to the ideas you share with me. And I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways: I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications in academic journals. I may also present the results of my study at

academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in our publications.

How my data will be stored

Your data will be stored in encrypted files and on password-protected computers. Only Dr Chihling Liu and Dr Xin Zhao (my supervisors) and I will see and have access to the raw data. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have questions about the project you may contact:

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Lancaster LA1 4YX

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Tel 01524 510197

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, you may contact:

Prof Nicholas Alexander (nicholas.alexander@lancaster.ac.uk)

Research Director of Lancaster University Management School

Marketing department

Tel 01524 510996

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix 3 Examples of unstructured interview questions / guides

Opening and gaming background

1. To start with, can you tell me about your experience with online games, especially MMORPGs?

Possible prompts:

- When did you begin to play these games, and which titles have been the most important for you
- Have there been key moments or “turning points” in your gaming life

Gifting, help and everyday cooperation

2. Can you describe a time when you helped someone in game, or gave them something that felt important to you

Possible prompts:

- What exactly did you give or do, and who was involved
- Why did you decide to help or give at that moment

3. Can you recall a moment when you received help or an item from someone that felt like a real “gift”

Possible prompts:

- What made that moment stand out for you
- Did you feel any kind of obligation or expectation afterwards

4. In your experience, how do players usually handle the sharing of loot or rewards in group activities

Possible prompts:

- Are there examples you remember as fair or generous
- Are there examples that you felt were unfair or created tension in the team

Unfairness, conflict and hostile practices

5. Have you experienced situations in game where someone clearly took advantage of the system or of other players

Possible prompts:

- For example, in dungeons, raids, or trading situations
- How did you and other players react at that time

6. Can you talk about your experience with open-world conflict, such as PK, repeated killing or long-term grudges between players or guilds

Possible prompts:

- What usually triggers these actions in the games you play
- Have you ever taken part in organized revenge or collective retaliation, and how did that feel

7. From your point of view, how do these kinds of conflicts influence relationships and the general atmosphere in your game community

Possible prompts:

- Do they mainly damage trust, or can they also bring people closer together
- Are there stories of conflict that later became shared memories or jokes among players

Avatars, NPCs and the game world

8. How would you describe your relationship with your main avatar and with important non-player characters in the game

Possible prompts:

- Do you ever feel attached to specific NPCs, shops or systems
- Have you had moments where interactions with NPCs or system rewards felt meaningful to you

9. In your view, how do game rules and systems shape giving and conflict in the world you play in

Possible prompts:

- For example, loot rules, punishment for killing, special events or shop design

- Can you recall any change in rules or design that clearly changed how players give, share or fight

Appendix 4 Examples of codes and themes

Final theme category	Sub-theme	Code (English)	Original Chinese term	Main empirical source(s)
Original online gift markets and early MMO economies	Historical evolution of online gifts and markets	early item gifting between strangers	互通有无	Historical documentary; Netnography
		early PK loot loss	爆装备	Historical documentary
		forum-based trading	求购	Historical documentary
		mixed sale/gift deals	半卖半送	Historical documentary; Netnography
		early red-name punishment	红名村	Historical documentary
Hybrid and everyday gifting practices in current MMORPGs	Generalized reciprocity in cooperative play	dungeon carrying	带本	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		carrying newcomers through instances	带新	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		bring-your-own buffs	自备小吃小药	In-depth interviews
		world-channel recruitment	摇人	Netnography
		letting others join	上车	In-depth interviews; Netnography
	Hybrid reciprocity and loot norms	ninja looting	毛装备	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		ninja player	毛人	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		ninja guild	毛会	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		all-need looter (never forgive or greed)	全需党 / “绝不贪婪，永不放弃”	In-depth interviews
		need/greed rolling	roll 点	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		fair loot master reputation	好团长	In-depth interviews
	Hybrid reciprocity and social debts	favour debt	人情债	In-depth interviews
		trustworthy player	君子	In-depth interviews
		not taking advantage	不贪	In-depth interviews

		big-shot carry	大佬带飞	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		reputation through helping	乐于助人	In-depth interviews
Commercialized gifting and cash-mediated exchange		cash top-up gifting	冲销返礼	In-depth interviews
		gifting in exchange for raid slots	贿赂	In-depth interviews
		stock up on items that will appreciate in value	黄牛	In-depth interviews
		lucky-draw gifts as investment	礼物投资	In-depth interviews; Netnography
Objective reciprocity and human-digital relationships		selling to NPC shop	卖店	In-depth interviews
		system-governed trade	系统交易	In-depth interviews
		quest reward loop	刷任务拿奖励	In-depth interviews; Netnography
Producer and world agency in structuring gifts and anti-gifts		loot rule patch	爆率调整	Historical documentary; In-depth interviews
		event-driven gifting quests	活动任务送礼物	Historical documentary; Netnography
		cash shop gift bundles	商城礼包	In-depth interviews
Anti-gift, PK and conflict-based exchange	Anti-gift and malicious reciprocity	open-world PK	野外 PK	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		corpse camping	守尸	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		red-name killing	红名	Historical documentary; In-depth interviews
		gear dropping through PVP	爆装备	In-depth interviews
		manhunt / chasing kill	追杀	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		vendetta killing	仇杀	In-depth interviews
		bounty hunting	悬赏	Netnography; In-depth interviews
		bullying low-level avatars	屠宝宝	In-depth interviews

Anti-gift as catalyst for solidarity	guild war	guild war	帮战	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		full-guild mobilization	全帮出动	In-depth interviews
		focus fire	集火	In-depth interviews
		defending city or keep	守城	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		maintaining guild city	养城	In-depth interviews
	Producer and world agency in structuring gifts and anti-gifts	PVP zone design for conflict	特定地图鼓励对战	Historical documentary; Netnography
		anti-cheat and ban stories	反作弊	In-depth interviews
Cultural rituals and online community culture	Objective reciprocity and human-digital relationships	NPC kinship address	NPC 爸爸 / 妈妈 / 老公 / 老婆	In-depth interviews
		random encounter gift	小奇遇	In-depth interviews
	Cultural rituals and symbolic gifting	red packet gifting	发红包	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		large "red bomb" gift	红色炸弹	In-depth interviews
		wedding gift money	随份子	In-depth interviews
		master-apprentice ceremony	拜师 / 收徒	In-depth interviews; Netnography
		festival cosmetics as gifts	节日时装	In-depth interviews
		guild celebration feast	开帮宴 / 庆功宴	In-depth interviews
Jianghu narratives and gossip	Jianghu narratives and gossip	gossip thread	八一八	Netnography
		Jianghu rumours	江湖故事 / 江湖传闻	Netnography; In-depth interviews
		exposing scandals	挂人	Netnography
		"good" or "notorious" guild label	正派帮会 / 恶名帮会	In-depth interviews; Netnography
	Role markers and mentoring	newbie leaf icon	豆芽	In-depth interviews
		mentor crown icon	皇冠	In-depth interviews

	casual “retirement” server image	养老区	In-depth interviews
	socially anxious player identity	社恐玩家	In-depth interviews
	long-term bond	一生推	In-depth interviews

